A TUG OF WAR FOR EFFECTIVENESS: U.S. EFFORTS TO BUILD THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM ARMED FORCES (1955-1973)

by

Jerad Harper
A Dissertation
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Committee:

_____ Colin Dueck, Chair

_____ Eric McGlinchey

_____ Michael A. Hunzeker

_____ Ming Wan, Program Director

_____ Mark J. Rozell, Dean

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George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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Jerad Harper
Master of Strategic Studies
United States Army War College, 2015
Master of Science
National Intelligence University, 2006
Master of Arts
Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2004
Bachelor of Science
United States Military Academy, 1993

Director: Colin Dueck, Professor
Schar School of Policy and Government

Spring 2020
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

DEDICATION

To all of the Americans who have served shoulder to shoulder with the forces of a partner nation or in support of these efforts, as well as to the Partners with whom we served. Most especially to those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the course of these endeavors. May your efforts to advance our mutual freedoms not be forgotten and may we learn from the lessons of the past as we embark on similar efforts in the future.

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The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the help and support of numerous people. First, I would like to thank my wife, Megan, who is not only my best friend and partner of many years, but a patient and tireless editor and sounding board. Thank you also to my two boys, Ryan and Justin, for also bearing with me and getting to hear about the ideas in this document for many long years.

Thank you to my faculty committee – Professors Colin Dueck, Eric McGlinchey and Mike Hunzeker – who have helped me to shape the concepts in this document from a base set of ideas into a coherent product. I try to repeat your patience and tireless guidance with my own students on a daily basic.

Thank you to all of my peers at George Mason University who also contributed to these ideas during our graduate studies. The opportunity to present these ideas and wrestle with the concepts in our discussions was invaluable in the early development of the concepts in the following pages.

And a final thank you to the faculty of the U.S. Army War College. To my leadership for giving me the freedom to pursue my studies and the long writing process. To my peers for your insights and help with the process and in serving as sounding boards for my ideas. Most especially to Col Mike Marra (USAF, Ret.) and COL Joel Hillison (USA, Ret.). To Mike, the rest of the faculty team of the Building Partner Capacity elective, and all of our students – I have learned so much about U.S. doctrine and our experiences in this field from each of you which has served to ground these ideas in their proper setting. To Joel for your constant insights and for helping to support me in developing our annual US Army War College Vietnam Veterans Panel which has served as a tremendous inspiration for this project.

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Area Logistics Command (South Vietnam).....ALC
Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)..... ARVN
Armored Personnel Carrier .....APC
Brigadier General.....BG
Building Partner Capacity.....BPC
Captain ..... CPT
Civil Guards (South Vietnam – later renamed to "Regional Forces").....CG
Civilian Irregular Defense Program) .....CIDG
Colonel.....COL
Corps Tactical Zone (South Vietnam) .....CTZ
General..... GEN
Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam) .....GVN
Lieutenant .....LT
Lieutenant Colonel (U.S. Army or RVNAF).....LTC
Lieutenant Colonel (U.S. Marine Corps)..... Lt Col
Lieutenant General (U.S. Army or RVNAF).....LTG
Lieutenant General (U.S. Marine Corps)..... Lt Gen
Major.....MAJ
Major General .....MG
People's Liberation Armed Forces (North Vietnam – also known as "Viet Cong")...PLAF
People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam – also called "North Vietnamese Army" or "NVA") ……..PAVN
Popular Forces (South Vietnam – formerly Self Defense Corps)..... PF
Regional Forces (South Vietnam – formerly Civil Guard).....RF
Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (South Vietnam) .....RVNAF
Security Assistance ..... SA
Security Cooperation .....SC
Security Forces Assistance ..... SFA
Self Defense Corps (South Vietnam – later renamed to "Popular Forces").....SDC
Task Force.....TF
Third Marine Amphibious Force .....III MAF
United States ..... U.S.
Vietnamese Air Force (South Vietnam) .....VNAF
Vietnamese Marine Corps (South Vietnam).....VNMC

ABSTRACT

A TUG OF WAR FOR EFFECTIVENESS: U.S. EFFORTS TO BUILD THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM ARMED FORCES (1955-1973)

Jerad Harper, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2020

Dissertation Director: Professor Colin Dueck

The fragile nature of weak states, with their turbulent power structures and corresponding shortfalls in government capacity, creates natural incentives for host nation governments to intervene with efforts to politicize their security forces and restructure them for personal loyalty to government leaders rather than organizational and institutional effectiveness. However, the patron states providing security force assistance for these weak states also possess significant influence over host nation security forces. This influence comes from their ability to inject extensive resources (both financial and personnel) in numerous ways across the host nation system as well as by the "attractiveness" of their more effective and high performing organizations, which produce a degree of emulation in their host nation partner.

This study directly focuses on this dynamic – a field of scholarship that has only received limited coverage. This dissertation argues that two aspects of patron state security assistance – 1) *the degree of patron intervention/assistance in host nation*

organizational practices and 2) *the nature of the commitment of patron state combat force*s are critical factors impacting the relative professionalization of the host nation's security force organizational practices (the intervening variable). Politicization by the host nation government of a weak state is considered as a constant – pulling organizational practices towards a "politicized" status. But different strategies in the two patron state security force assistance variables can serve as countervailing forces that stop or reverse such negative trends. The outcome of these competing forces upon host nation organizational practices produces variation along a spectrum of security force effectiveness, which we can measure through demonstrated performance on the battlefield.

The dissertation examines the three stages of U.S. security force assistance to South Vietnam from 1955 to 1973 as a critical case to understand this variation. During the advisory period from 1955 to 1964, a steadily increasing U.S commitment of advisors and supporting air and logistics capabilities alongside a massive training and equip effort was unable to balance extensive politicization by the Diem regime. From 1965-1968 the U.S. committed major combat forces to prevent the defeat of South Vietnam but its efforts to improve security force effectiveness were limited. During the final, more "partnered" period from 1969-1973, the U.S. did produce major gains in South Vietnamese effectiveness, but these efforts were still a work in progress when the decision was made to withdraw all forces in 1973.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Puzzle

In May 2014, three Iraqi Army and one Iraqi National Police Division defending the approaches to the northwestern Iraqi city of Mosul collapsed against an invasion of Iraq by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) forces apparently only one third of their size. A numerically superior force with advanced equipment, including more than thirty of the US Army's vaunted M1A1 tanks, was defeated by a ragtag and loosely organized force of seemingly untrained militants despite a decade of US attempts to build competent, professional Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the expenditure of 25.7 billion dollars in targeted military assistance.[1] This military debacle is especially surprising when compared against more effective performance several years earlier by Iraqi Security Forces during the complicated urban assault into Baghdad's Sadr City district in 2009 alongside US forces.[2] Nor can this be simply written off as different units performing differently since some units such as the Iraqi Army's elite 9th Mechanized Division saw action in both engagements.

Why did such an apparent degradation of effectiveness occur in Iraq's security forces in just five years? The US military is regarded as one of the most effective military

[1] Belasco, 2014.
[2] Author's personal experience. The professional and effective performance of Iraqi Security Forces in this operation was a surprise to many observers at the time.

forces in the world. After security assistance from such an expert military why did the security forces of Iraq not evolve into a similarly proficient structure after such a massive assistance effort?

This dynamic is not unique to Iraq. Four decades prior to this conflict, during the Vietnam War, the US sought to develop the armed forces of South Vietnam into an independently capable force. These efforts produced significant, although uneven, improvement in South Vietnamese effectiveness during the conflict. As the US began its "Vietnamization" drawdown in 1969, this uneven improvement had resulted in some South Vietnamese units and commanders up to division level that demonstrated the ability to integrate combined arms, particularly the use of modern air support, in combat operations against the enemy. By 1972, this improvement had risen to corps level, with the newly installed leadership of I Corps directing a combined arms counterattack that retook captured territory in northern South Vietnam against numerically superior North Vietnamese forces. Yet alongside this improvement are numerous cases of ineffective South Vietnamese units unable to perform their basic missions and commanders incapable of coordinating the various battlefield elements integral to modern warfare.

Why does such variation occur? This dissertation will seek to explain the dynamics involved in weak state security forces supported by the third party efforts of foreign governments commonly known as "Security Forces Assistance" (SFA) and why these assistance efforts produce various outcomes. It will seek to develop these dynamics by learning from the U.S. experience in Security Force Assistance to South Vietnam that can be applied to similar foreign policy endeavors in the future.

Patron Security Forces Assistance vs. Host Nation Politicization

This study assumes that the fragile nature of weak states, with their turbulent power structures and corresponding shortfalls in government capacity, creates natural incentives for host nation governments to intervene with efforts to politicize their security forces and restructure them for personal loyalty to government leaders rather than organizational and institutional effectiveness. However, the patron states providing security assistance for these weak states also possess significant influence over host nation security forces. This influence comes from their ability to inject extensive resources (both financial and personnel) in numerous ways across the host nation system as well as by the "attractiveness" of their more effective and high performing organizations, which produce a degree of emulation in their host nation partner.

Until recently, the involvement of external state actors in security force effectiveness was largely discounted or ignored by authors studying this problem. While the drawdown of U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan has spurred some interest in security force assistance, the field of literature addressing this issue is still only thinly covered. This study will directly focus on this issue and seek to expand on existing scholarship to better understand the underlying dynamics.

This dissertation argues that two aspects of patron state security assistance – 1) *the degree of patron intervention/assistance in host nation organizational practices* and 2) *the nature of the commitment of patron state combat force*s are critical factors impacting the relative professionalization of the host nation's security force organizational practices (the intervening variable). Politicization by the host nation

government is taken as a constant – pulling organizational practices towards a "politicized" status. But different strategies in the two patron state security assistance variables can serve as countervailing forces that stop or reverse such negative trends. The outcome of these competing forces upon host nation organizational practices produces variation along a spectrum of security force effectiveness, which we can measure through demonstrated performance on the battlefield.

Evaluation of these dynamics will occur first through close examination of the evolution of U.S. security assistance to South Vietnam from 1955 to 1973. This major foreign policy effort involved three major periods of assistance characterized by very different U.S. approaches that provide significant variation in both the independent and dependent variables.

Research Design:

This dissertation seeks to explain variations in resulting security force effectiveness in cases of United States security force assistance to weak states. The dissertation first examines and operationalizes the dependent variable, security force effectiveness. It then examines potential hypotheses for variation in security force effectiveness and deductively develops a model to explain the impact of security force assistance by a patron state upon security force effectiveness in weak state clients. This model is then tested by applying it to the case of South Vietnam and examining the evolution of U.S. security force over three different periods from 1955 to 1973.

This study consists of a qualitative, case study analysis of U.S. assistance to South Vietnamese Armed Forces from 1954 to 1973. This is a critical case that dominated U.S.

foreign policy throughout the time period. This case study is divided into three separate periods – Advising (1954-1964), U.S. Intervention (1965-1968) and Vietnamization (1969-1973) – which allow the comparison of variations in the independent variables while holding a number of other potential factors (different patron and client nations, culture, opposing force) constant. This conflict is also extensively documented, providing a wealth of information to assess the key variables.

The focus on U.S. security force assistance to South Vietnam over these three periods provides the opportunity to peform deeper, rich analysis to appreciate the complexity and nuance involved in this overall case. Looking at this case over time also allows us to examine how the actions of different South Vietnamese governments impacted its security forces. Overall, this dissertation argues that weak states such as South Vietnam are driven by the nature of their societies to attempt to intervene and politicize their security forces. Because of this, host nation intervention will be considered as a constant in the model that will developed in chapter 2 to explain the relationship between patrons and client security forces pursuing security force assistance in a weak state. By examining South Vietnam during the Diem administration in its early years, the Thieu/Ky administration in its later years, and the intervening governments that temporarily existed between them we will see that despite the nuances between their approaches, all of these governments had many similarities in their relationships with their security forces.

Process-tracing these three sub-cases provides the opportunity not just to establish causal effect – whether the independent variable causes variation in the dependent

variable, but true causal mechanisms – determining the actual manner in which variance in the dependent variable (security force effectiveness) is produced through the influence of the independent variables (the degree of patron intervention/assistance in host nation organizational practices and the nature of the commitment of patron state combat forces).

Case studies proceed according to George and Bennett's admonition that this type analysis should involve structured, focused comparison.[3] Research was structured around the research question (ie "what causes variation in security force effectiveness in weak states receiving security forces assistance?") rather than a massive historical overview of every facet of these complex periods. The following chapters present an overview of these periods and then focus on the application of the independent variables. Each chapter then focuses on particular battles within each of these sub-cases to examine how these variables were at play and how they contributed to a range of performance by host-nation security force units. Examining this battlefield performance allows the measurement of security force effectiveness, the dependent variable. In particular, the study will looks for outliers – why did some units perform well amidst so many others that did not? This approach provides the opportunity to perform multiple within-case observations as well as between the two larger cases over a period of years.

In researching these cases, I first established a baseline through secondary source literature and then expanded upon this depth through archival research. The Vietnam War has been extensively documented and extensive archival resources were available at the Library of Congress and nearby Military History Institute within the U.S. Army War

[3] George and Bennett (2005).

College Library in Carlisle, PA as well as online through the Texas Tech University's Vietnam Virtual Archive. Rich secondary sources and the declassification of a wealth of government documents provided the ability to research the majority of data requirements. One group of sources that were particularly helpful were the "Indochina Monographs," a U.S. Army project conducted after the war where a number of former South Viettnamese generals examined the conduct of various facets of the war from the South Vietnamese perspective. This dissertation heavily relies on their perceptions, which provide a unique ability to examine the impact of U.S. security force assistance upon its South Vietnamese clients from THEIR viewpoint, something that is often not shown in a work drawing heavily from American sources.

Dissertation Organization

The remaining dissertation chapters are organized as follows:

Chapter 2: Theory. Develops the dependent variable – *host nation security force effectiveness*, the dynamic of *host nation politicization* (held constant), the Intervening Variable – *host nation organizational practices* and two Independent Variables – *patron state organizational intervention* and *patron state combat force commitment*, along with their observable indicators in a detailed and coherent theoretical framework.

Chapter 3: Case Study - U.S. Support to South Vietnam. Introduces the South Vietnam Case study and the key players. Analyzes **South Vietnam Period I – Advising (1954-1964)**. This period involves U.S assistance to the fledgling Republic of South Vietnam through the 1963 military coup that assassinated President Diem and plunged

the South Vietnamese government into chaos. Examines the battle of Ap Bac (January, 1963) in detail.

Chapter 4: South Vietnam Period II – U.S. Intervention (1964-1968). Analyses US security force assistance to South Vietnam as the commitment of U.S. ground forces assumed primacy in U.S. policy. Examines the performance of the South Vietnamese 1st Division in Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968 in detail.

Chapter 5: South Vietnam Period III - Vietnamization (1969-1973). Analyzes U.S. security force assistance as the U.S. began to rapidly transition the war to the South Vietnamese. Examines three battles in successive years as the South Vietnamese assumed increasing responsibility for their own security: Operation Toan Thang 42 during the Cambodian Incursion of 1970, Operation Lam Son 71 in 1971, and Quang Tri Province in the Easter Offensive of 1972.

Chapter 6: Conclusions.

Discusses Theoretical Insights, Policy Prescriptions, and Areas for Future Research.

Initial Implications

Applying this insight to current and future security assistance situations may have significant implications for U.S. foreign policy as well as for the political science subfield of international security. Security assistance to weak states is a significant aspect of

American foreign policy involving the application of extensive financial and organizational resources, not to mention countless lives that have been lost seeking to achieve stability in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade and a half. There is clear recognition that developing effective security forces is a critical aspect of improving stability in weak states, yet little understanding of the factors at play in these challenging situations is provided in existing literature.

In the theoretical realm, the body of work related to military effectiveness is still relatively small, covered sporadically over the years. No work to date has been done addressing the broader whole of government concept of *security* forces as opposed to purely military forces, despite the recognition that militaries are not the only element at play, particularly in counter-insurgencies. Additionally, only a small body of emerging work has been done on the impact of coup-proofing on military effectiveness and no work has linked research into both politicization and security assistance as contributors to military effectiveness.

In the policy realm, the results of further study into these dynamics has relevance for the formation of U.S. doctrine related to military assistance to weak states as well as overall counter-insurgency doctrine. Understanding the causal mechanisms impacting security force effectiveness can allow us to evaluate our present policies towards these countries. Do we need to change the manner in which we are performing security assistance? Are there countries that we can help and countries that we can't? Or, are there ways in which we can mitigate the politicization of host nation security forces or shape

its impact? For that matter, are we even accounting for dynamics such as politicization in our security assistance efforts or do we need to reshape our approach?

CHAPTER TWO: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Until now, the majority of social science research into weak state security forces has focused on the dynamics of host nation politicization – in particular on the causes and impacts of a strategy known as "coup-proofing". Research into security force assistance from a political science standpoint is quite limited. Other than a small body of recent scholarship (Biddle and Ladwig) looking at the challenge of security force assistance as a principal-agent problem, little previous work and no previous work has examined the interaction of these competing dynamics. Instead, as stated earlier, the influence of external state actors has been largely ignored or discounted. This study attempts to alleviate this gap by:

1) refining our understanding of security force effectiveness by looking at it as a dependent variable influenced by organizational practices (the intervening variable) and

2) providing a framework to assess different security force assistance strategies and their role as independent variables impacting his process, while

3) accounting for the strong influence of host national politicization upon these dynamics, which is taken as a constant for weak states.

A note on doctrine. This dissertation frequently discusses U.S. military doctrine. Understanding doctrine is important because it explains how the military forces conducting these activities should act and this should drive their allocation of personnel

and financial resources. For standardization purposes, since different countries or even military services have different doctrine, we will focus on the application of security force assistance by the U.S. military and specifically use the doctrine of the U.S. Army since it is generally the largest American security force assistance provider. However, much of this is equally applicable to any country providing security force assistance to another.

Understanding Security Force Assistance

The most commonly accepted worldwide term used to describe efforts to improve the effectiveness of another country's security forces is "Building Partner Capacity" (BPC). However, as this term is also sometimes applied holistically to a range of capacity-building efforts focused not just on the security sector, but on other sectors of governance as well, this can sometimes lead to confusion as to what is being discussed. For example, U.S. joint (i.e. inter-service) doctrine portrays building partner capacity as the efforts that U.S. military forces perform to improve a partner's security sector. Although this joint doctrine views BPC efforts as long term and holistically oriented at entire security sector institutions rather than just individual pieces (units, organizations, etc), there is no specification that they are necessarily required to be part of whole of government efforts.[4] In contrast, the U.S. Army considers Building Partner Capacity to be only one part of a larger whole. For the Army, BPC is a comprehensive and integrated set of whole of government activities, programs, and engagement (which the Army calls

[4] United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-07: Stability* (3 August 2016), https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doctine-Pubs/ (Accessed 7 March 2019), D-7; United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-20: Security Cooperation* (23 May 2017), https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doctine-Pubs/ (Accessed 7 March 2019), II-2.

"unified action") "that enhance the ability of partners for security, rule of law, essential services, governance, economic development, and other critical functions".[5]

Within the U.S. government, two departments have primary authority to conduct BPC aimed at a host nation's security sector – the Department of Defense and the Department of State.

Under the provisions of Title 22, U.S. Code, the Department of State oversees the foreign military sales program, foreign military financing, and the provision of training and education for foreign militaries. This specific group of programs is referred to as "*security assistance*" and is provided in the form of direct purchases, grants, loans or credit specifically "to advance [U.S.] national policy objectives".[6] While the State Department oversees these programs, they are largely administered by the Defense Department, with some small exceptions such as financial support to international peacekeepers.

The range of BPC efforts carried out by the U.S. military is more broad and falls under the heading of "*security cooperation*". Security Cooperation not only includes the security assistance programs and activities that the Defense Department carries out on behalf of the State Department, as well as "all Department of Defense interactions, programs and activities with foreign security forces (FSF) and their institutions." Security Cooperation could thus be weapons sales, advisory programs, or combined military operations with the U.S. and another country.[7]

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[5] United States Army, *Army Doctrinal Publication 3-07: Stability* (Washington D.C: Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 2012), 4.
[6] Joint Publication 3-20, vii.
[7] Joint Publication 3-20, v.

The U.S pursues security cooperation for three purposes: 1) "to build security *relationships"*, 2) "to gain or maintain *operational access"*, and 3) to "support the development of capability and capacity of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions".[8] This last category, where the U.S. seeks to make its partners better, is termed "*Security Force Assistance*." The U.S. military defines security force assistance (SFA) as "the set of activities that contribute to unified action by the [U.S. government] to support the development of the capacity and capabilities of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions."[9]

This definition of SFA is useful for the military so that they can be specific and differentiate their efforts from those of other elements of government. However, from a non-doctrinal standpoint, I would argue that we are not solely interested in the activities of the military, but rather all of the U.S. government activities that support the development of a foreign military. For the purposes of this dissertation, we will consider security force assistance to be *all of the whole of government activities (i.e. the "unified action") of the U.S. or any other SFA provider that support the development of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions.*

As discussed above, in some cases, military exercises, weapons sales, and even advisory efforts are carried out primarily to strengthen relationships and support U.S. interests or to gain access to bases or the ability to deploy through a country. Making the partnered military better may be a peripheral goal, but is not the central priority. *In other*

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[8] Joint Publication 3-20, v.; Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance, *Security Force Assistance Planner's Guide* (1 January 2016), 1-1.
[9] Joint Publication 3-20, II-7.

cases, however, security cooperation is very specifically aimed at making the partnered military more capable of accomplishing its required missions because that is important to advance U.S. interests. This will be the focus of this dissertation, looking at cases where the development of partner capacity and capability is a priority for the United States.

So how does the U.S. generally seek to make our partner's better? Common U.S. doctrine and practice emphasizes finding the *overlap* between our own goals and those of our partner nation and meeting their mutual needs.[10] Essentially this is a patron-client relationship and ideally the relationship works like this:

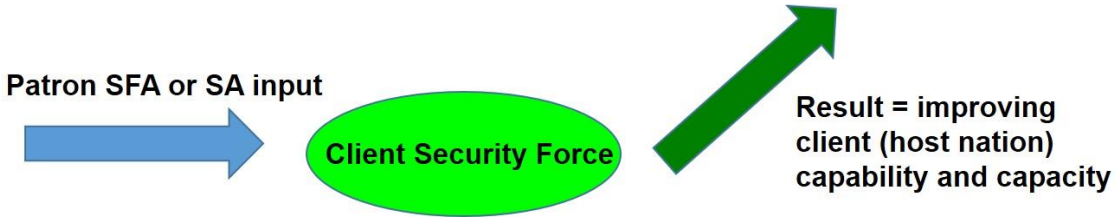

Figure 1: Idealized Input-Output Model

The patron (the U.S.) provides a range of inputs and together these result in improvements in the capability and capacity of the client's security forces.

And in some ideal cases this is actually how the process works… But why doesn't this work more often? U.S. joint doctrine emphasizes that "multiple activities executed over time" are required to "make progress towards an objective", but also states that "[o]ften, causal relationships are difficult to discern, making it difficult to determine the

[10] Joint Publication 3-20, III-4.

extent to which an SC activity influenced a [partner nation].[11] This confusion regarding causal relationships is unhelpful, for without understanding why something actually does or does not occur it is impossible to produce results with any degree of regularity. This dissertation will attempt to determine this causal relationship.

Before we get there, however, we need to first develop the concept of security force effectiveness and then examine common explanations for its variation in the field of security studies.

The Dependent Variable: Security Force Effectiveness

As currently structured, US security cooperation is focusing on developing *Capability* (Can they do a given task?) and *Capacity* (How much can they do and can they sustain it?)[12] The problem with these terms for our purposes is that they don't lend themselves to explaining variations in performance. Instead, we'll use the term *effectiveness*. Effectiveness implies not simply having a capability, but the concept that some militaries employ these capabilities better, or more "effectively", than others. Since effectiveness gets to the "how well" something is accomplished, this serves as better way of comparing the relative value or measurement of different security forces *regardless* of different characteristics or opponents.

Why regardless of these capabilities? The goal for this study is to be able to determine a relative scale of evaluating security forces. In order to allow comparison, we need to make this measure agnostic of the opponent or particular conditions.

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[11] Joint Publication 3-20, III-5.
[12] United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-20: Security Cooperation* (23 May 2017), https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doctine-Pubs/ (Accessed 7 March 2019) I-2

Effectiveness speaks to "pound for pound" performance. It doesn't necessarily mean that a smaller force will beat a larger force, although it does mean that the smaller force will have significant advantages. It also doesn't take account for intangibles such as chance or the particular nature of terrain. But what it does say is that given two similarly equipped forces, the more effective force is more likely to win.

Although U.S. joint and military doctrine focus on capability and capacity rather than effectiveness, this term does find frequent use in doctrine. Unfortunately, effectiveness, per se, is not defined, however the Army *does* define a *Measure of Effectiveness* – the criteria "used to measure changes in system behavior, capability, or operational environment…tied to measuring the attainment of an endstate".[13] Measuring behaviors and capabilities is important, which is why this term is used more often in academic literature.

In their classic multi-volume study, Millett and Murray define military effectiveness as "the process by which Armed Forces convert resources into fighting power".[14] They argue that military effectiveness exists at the political, strategic, operational and tactical levels. For our purposes, however, it is easier to envision this as a political/strategic/organizational level dealing with resources and an operational/tactical level dealing with campaigns and battles. For Millett and Murray, a fully effective military is one deriving maximum combat power from the physical and political

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[13] United States Army, *Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 3-07: Stability* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 31 August 2012), 4-12.
[14] Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," in Military Effectiveness: Volume 1: The First World War," (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2.

resources available. Combat power is "the ability to destroy the enemy while limiting the damage he can inflict in return".[15]

But conflict today is not simply the realm of the military, it involves close interaction between the military and intelligence and police forces – particularly if a nation is threatened on its own soil. Thus, we can expand the existing definitions of military effectiveness to create a new definition for security force effectiveness -- the ability of the combined elements of the national security structure to convert resources into the power necessary to dominate terrain, whether internally (ie for a counter-insurgency or terrorist threat) or externally. Security force effectiveness similarly has a political/strategic component focused on acquiring and applying resources producing the ability to secure national objectives defined by political leadership through *coercion*. It also has an operational/tactical level, focused on conducting campaigns to dominate (ie to holistically control) internal and external terrain. Note that domination and control can be either oriented at an opposing force or more generally at the terrain and population. Both will be considered to achieve the same objective.

We can further understand the concept of combat power by using Stephen Biddle's concept of "force employment" and modern warfare. In *Military Power*, Biddle argues that the possession of material capabilities alone is not an effective measure, but that instead the key factor is *how these capabilities are used.*[16] It is not simply developments in weapons technology, but rather the integration of modern weapons with

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in* Modern Warfare (Princeton University Press: Princeton New Jersey, 2004), 191-192.

new tactics that have led to such tremendous increases in lethality over the course of the twentieth century. This increased lethality is available to those who can:

1) Independently maneuver dispersed small units to present less of a target for the enemy
2) Rapidly mass precision firepower to suppress and destroy the enemy
3) Combine multi-spectrum capabilities (infantry, armor, airpower) through combined arms operations[17]

The result is a "modern system" military which brings the ability to deliver tremendous casualties against exposed opponents as well as "simultaneously to take an entire theater's terrain, to do so quickly, and to limit casualties."[18] However, this can be mitigated by an opponent's ability to protect its forces by using defense in depth, defensive maneuver, and cover and concealment in the defense or dispersion and mobility in the offense.[19]

Such operations are highly complex and require extensive training to accomplish. This system requires "extensive independent decision-making by junior officers and senior enlisted personnel" and Biddle acknowledges that "[a]mong the most serious drawbacks of the modern system is its tremendous complexity, and the high levels of skill it therefore demands in soldiers and officers. Not all armies can provide such skill."[20] Victory in a confrontation of a modern system military vs. another modern system military depends on expertise, numbers and numerous other factors. However, a

[17] Biddle, 35-39.
[18] Biddle, 51.
[19] Biddle, 44-51.
[20] Biddle, 49, 50.

modern system military fighting a non-modern system military will rapidly vanquish its opponent independent of numbers or other factors, with the most recent examples being the defeat of Iraqi military forces in 1991 and 2003 by Western coalition opponents led by the United States.[21]

Talmadge expands further on Biddle's arguments and argues that we can evaluate "combat effectiveness" in militaries in two aspects: *Basic tactics* (the ability to perform common tasks integral to an individual or small unit's job as infantry, armor, intelligence, etc) and *complex operations* (the ability to integrate joint forces in operations, recognizing that such operations require "significant low level initiative and high-level coordination").[22]

I agree with Talmadge in her operationalization of military effectiveness (or in my case security force effectiveness) by examining the "outputs" of the security effort. If we use this to modify Millett et al's levels of military effectiveness, the internal workings of the system at the political/strategic level can be seen as the "inputs" that emerge as the operational and tactical level "outputs" of the system. This is something that security forces inherently recognize, that the structures and processes involved in managing the organization and generating (ie training and educating) trained and ready forces. These outputs are the bottom line requirements for any security force – they provide a country with the ability to apply a security effort at the operational/tactical level (ie versus a given opponent or to control or protect a given population).

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[21] Biddle, 199-201.
[22] Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 6.

However, I believe that Talmadge slightly misrepresents the dynamics at play. Rather than two separate variables (Complex Operations and Basic Tactics), I will examine variance in security force effectiveness in a spectrum running from a high end of "Combined/Joint Operations" to a mid-range of "Basic Proficiency" and a low end of "Lack of Basic Proficiency."

Combined Arms/Joint Operations is the successful coordination and integration of multiple types of security force elements (infantry, armor, airpower, intelligence, local and national police) within a given operation. Achieving Combined/Joint Operations by a security force is optimal for meeting national political goals. The ability to conduct combined/joint operations inherently involves the ability to perform individual and small unit tasks for each of the security elements.

The middle range of the spectrum of variance in security force effectiveness is *Basic Proficiency*. Basic Proficiency is found where individual security force elements are successfully able to perform all or a majority of their basic individual and small unit skills (for example, individual marksmanship, the ability to conduct community policing operations, the ability to maintain equipment and the ability to effectively gather and analyze intelligence). Though able to perform their particular

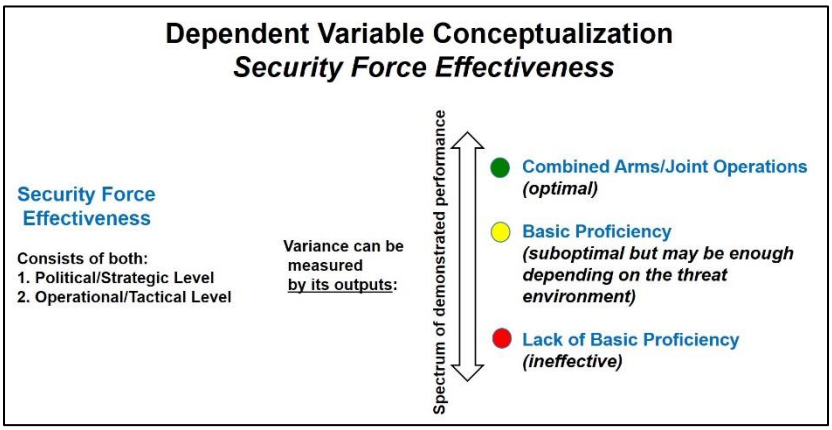

Figure 2: The Dependent Variable – Security Force Effectiveness

function, security forces are generally unable to successfully coordinate and integrate with other elements during a given operation. Basic Proficiency is a suboptimal outcome. However, depending on the nature of the threat environment, such suboptimal security forces may be equal to the requirements of the national political goals. If the threat is low, this may be all that is needed out of a particular state's security forces.

The bottom level in the spectrum of security effectiveness variation is *Lack of Basic Proficiency*, which exists when security force elements are unable to achieve success in the majority of integral tasks during a given operation. At this level security forces are considered ineffective and incapable of meeting national political goals.

Why Do Militaries Naturally Trend Towards Single Component vs. Integrated Capabilities?

Security force organizations such as militaries, intelligence agencies, or police inherently focus on developing single capabilities (infantry, armor, surface warfare, submarines, fighters, bombers, intelligence analysts, intelligence collectors, line police, SWAT teams, etc). From an organizational standpoint this makes things simpler for the training and organization of "like vs. like". Training and operating multiple capabilities together is more complicated because it involves the integration of multiple systems. Integrating across services is harder because it requires coordinating different SOPs, regulations, etc. Integrating between agencies is even more difficult as the SOPs, approaches, and base requirements between the different elements are even more divergent.

These are natural obstacles which can nonetheless be overcome by security forces that work to overcome them and develop increased integration – moving higher on the spectrum of security force effectiveness. Nevertheless, this challenge must be acknowledged. This is why highly professional militaries place such emphasis on developing doctrine and continuously training their units in combined arms practices to maintain and improve their effectiveness. As we'll see further below, these natural barriers can sometimes be expanded by particular state actions when such coordination may not be desirable on the part of the central government.

Examining Security Force Effectiveness for Counter-Insurgency (COIN) vs. Conventional Operations

Contemporary security forces are not only faced with conventional threats. The last half century has shown that even militaries with a high degree of conventional effectiveness can encounter extreme difficulties when facing insurgent opponents. This has led some to argue that security force effectiveness for conventional and counter-insurgency (COIN) operations are two separate dynamics. However, this is not the case and misses the point – COIN does not require a different type of effectiveness. It is just inherently more difficult and requires even more extensive integration of individually competent elements from multiple security forces components (ie greater security force effectiveness) than conventional operations.

If we try to conceptualize COIN and conventional operations as truly different dynamics at the tactical level, where does COIN end and where do conventional

operations begin? U.S. Marine Corps operations in Afghanistan's Helmand province in 2011 involved the combined integration of infantry, armor and aviation assets against a determined enemy. As some of the same Marines could easily have participated in the U.S. ground offensive against Iraqi forces in 2003 – an acknowledged conventional fight – *would they have described the tactical engagements in these two conflicts as significantly different?* What about their predecessors fighting to retake Hue during the Tet offensive in 1967?

One of the most influencial counterinsurgency theorists of the 20th century, David Galula, stated "[t]he counterinsurgent's armed forces have to fulfill two different missions: to break the military power of the insurgent and to ensure the safety of the territory in each area.[23]" The first task for counterinsurgents – to break insurgent military power – is essentially conventional. What is different in COIN, however, is this second task requiring security forces to protect local populations and gain their support.[24]

I acknowledge that successful COIN requires tactical units to employ additional population-centric skill sets at the tactical level for the periods in such conflicts where such units are not as heavily engaged in major combat operations. However, I would instead suggest that conceptualizing COIN and conventional effectiveness as two separate classifications misses the point by failing to clarify the critical requirements producing advantage for combatants. Rather than separating these concepts, if we continue with a force employment approach examining the integration of various

[23] Galula, 93.
[24] Galula, 93.

elements to achieve greater lethality and precision against an opposing force, then we see not two separate dynamics, but rather a spectrum of combined/joint/interagency operations.

As discussed in the previous section, Biddle has shown how the use of combined arms in conventional operations increases the lethality of a combatant. However, Biddle argues that this same approach is equally true with irregular warfare. For example, he suggests that more proficient guerilla forces such as the Al Qaeda elements within the Taliban were able to blend in with the population and mountainous terrain to avoid precision bombing – essentially functioning as a modern system military in the defense.[25] If we further explore and expand upon his concept, we can see an increasing spectrum of lethality based on the degree of this integration.

On a conventional battlefield, the use of combined arms (integrating the use of intra-service elements - for example, the combination of an army's infantry, artillery and armor elements) on the battlefield increases lethality. The use of combined and *joint* capabilities (integrating inter-service elements - for example, coordinating the use of ground forces with airpower and naval support) increases the lethality of a combatant even further.

Effective militaries can improve their survivability against such increased lethality by the use of dispersion and rapid movement.[26] Insurgents, however, have an

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[25] Biddle, 199.

[26] This is where Biddle stops. While he has given us an excellent means of conceptualizing lethality vs. survivability for conventional opponents, he does not extend his analysis to COIN. But that doesn't mean that we can't expand upon his analytical approach to include this additional category of conflict, just as we have expanded upon his concept of combined operations.

additional advantage – they are able to exploit asymmetric advantage by blending into populations and reducing the ability of their more highly equipped adversaries to apply overwhelming firepower against them. Insurgents thus have an inherently greater degree of survivability that allows them to mitigate their usual disadvantage in firepower and provides significant advantage.

In order to mitigate this advantage, COIN forces must not only be able to apply force against opponents in the traditional manner, but just as importantly (and perhaps more so), they need to be able to establish and maintain population security. Controlling the population reduces insurgent ability to resupply, move freely and hide themselves within the general population – all contributing to a reduction in insurgent survivability advantages.

However, without a high degree of precision, security operations to control and separate populations from insurgents risk the excessive use of force that would turn such a population towards the insurgent. Such precision requires a significantly higher degree of information as well as a continuous security presence and thus successful COIN requires the close integration of intelligence[27] and police forces[28] with traditional military forces (or paramilitary forces that can bring the increased firepower normally possessed by militaries). COIN often also involves the integration of other government or non-

[27] This is not to say that intelligence is not a factor in traditional conventional operations. However, COIN operations require a much greater degree of intelligence information pushed down to lower tactical levels in order to gain the greater precision required by COIN. Additionally, COIN intelligence requires additional information not normally needed for conventional operations. For example, *which* particular population groups are supporting which insurgent elements and *which* are potential supporters for COIN forces?
[28] Police forces bring particular skill sets enabling them to work with the population and by the nature of their interactions with the population generally provide further intelligence allowing greater precision.

government elements providing reconstruction and economic assistance to restore the which further separate the insurgent from the population.

The pinnacle of security force effectiveness is thus, combined, joint, and *interagency* integration. Security forces competent in interagency integration, but not combined and joint military integration, are less effective than those integrating all of these elements. Incorporating conventional vs. COIN operation requirements into the spectrum of security force effectiveness discussed earlier now produces a more descriptive spectrum, which is displayed at right.

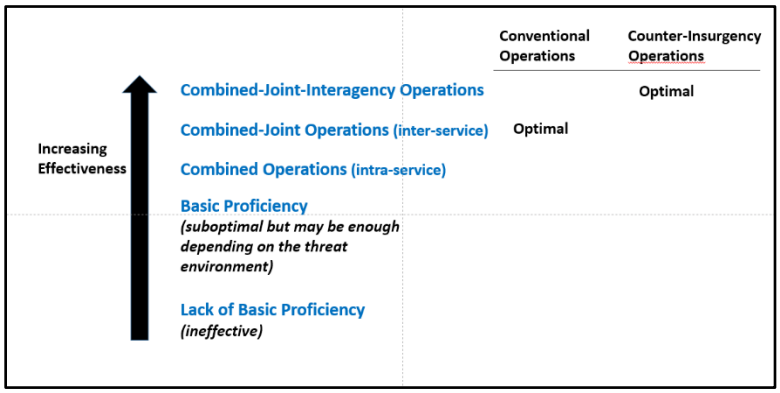

Figure 3: Increasing Effectiveness: COIN vs. Conventional Operations

Now that we have developed an operationalized understanding of security force effectiveness, we need to examine the key variables at play in shaping variation in security force effectiveness in weak states.

Possible Hypotheses

So what are possible explanations for variations in security force effectiveness? A number of authors have provided explanations for such variation, although only a small minority discuss the impact of assistance from outside states.

Warrior vs. Non-Warrior Cultures

One common explanation is that of "Warrior vs. Non-Warrior Cultures." Certain cultural factors endemic within certain ethnic groups (for example, Arabs) or dominant

within a particular country (for example, Israel) create dynamics that enhance or degrade tactical ability. These traits are part of the cultural makeup of these populations. No amount of training will overcome these inherent shortfalls.[29] So the observable indicator for this theory is that particular cultures exhibit particular shortfalls. This is the dominant point of view of Kenneth Pollack in his comprehensive 2002 work, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991*. Pollack's argument is that Arab armies from 1948-1991 suffered from inherent weaknesses in tactical leadership and information management and technical incompetence not found in their Israeli and Western (1991 Gulf War) opponents. This set of "critical limitations on their combat effectiveness…proved to be insurmountable obstacles to their military operations" and particularly "devastating in an age of warfare in which decentralized command, aggressive and innovative tactical leadership, accurate information flows, and advanced weaponry were the keys to victory."[30]

In his more recent (2019) *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, Pollack expands on how culture works to shape particular performances in Arab militaries. He argues that a reverence for tradition reinforced by educational practices emphasizing rote memorization rather than questioning produces a "dominant culture [that} consistently suppresses creativity, innovation, imagination and

[29] Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 582; Rosen.
[30] Pollack, 582.

all similar divergences from established patterns," and favors the centralization of (and deference to) authority and information. [31]

In both of his works, Pollack's description of the realities of modern combat parallels that of Biddle – militaries combining small unit initiative with combined arms integration are dramatically more effective than those that do not. Pollack's argument that certain security forces may exhibit a common set of flaws that inhibit their effectives seems important. It is hard to discount the fact that education and environment do contribute to adult performance in at least some ways. But is culture the dominant reason for factor that shapes security force performance? Did these problems simply occur because they were Arabs – or is something else to blame?

If Arab militaries do indeed suffer from these particular shortfalls, then why do we see variation in performance within this ethnic group? For example, why did the Iraqi Special Forces that led operations to retake Mosul perform so much more effectively than their peers?[32] Additionally, why do we see *similar problems in performance across different cultures*? For example, why do we see similarities between the Iraqi military in 2014 and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War since Arabs and Vietnamese clearly have very different cultures?

Culture Lag

Another closely related explanation for security force ineffectiveness is "Culture Lag" or "Cultural Resistance". The argument under this theory is that culture contributes

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[31] Kenneth Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 372-5; 291.
[32] Jahara Matisek and William Reno, "Getting American Security Force Assistance Right: Political Context Matters," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 92 (1st Quarter 2019), 70.

to organizational shortfalls that impede military effectiveness. This is similar to Pollack's argument, but more generalized to third world countries rather than something specific to Arabs. Hinkle et al. elaborate that "systemic impediments in many nations…will retard or frustrate attempts to translate military resources into improved military skill."[33] These impediments are produced by governance shortfalls caused by cultural norms. Because they derive from norms, these impediments are extremely difficult to change by policy and thus tend to be stable over long periods of time. The observable indicators for this theory are problems occurring when it is difficult to train and utilize weapons systems designed for different (usually Western and non-Western) doctrines or cultures. Western doctrine and technology rely on initiative gained from Western educational systems and not found in most third world or non-western (ie authoritarian) systems.[34]

This is taking Pollack's argument a step further. Rather than saying that some cultures fight better than others because of how they were raised, independent of organizational factors, this argument is saying that particular cultural factors contribute to organizational shortcomings that degrade military effectiveness. However, if this is the case, then why do we see similar problems occurring in different cultures? Unless one is so arrogant as to believe there is such a thing as a "Third World Culture," we probably shouldn't see the same sorts of results happening in different cultures. Additionally, this approach is hard to quantify. However, we shouldn't discount this idea that organizational weaknesses within governments create impediments to security force

[33] Wade Hinkle, Michael Fischerkeller, Matthew Diascro, and Rafael Bonoan, "Why Nations Differ in Military Skill – And How that Should Affect U.S. Defense Planning," *Institute for Defense Analysis* (Oct 1999), es-2
[34] Hinkle et al., es-2-3.

effectiveness. This seems like a useful concept worth exploring. But as with Pollack's earlier argument - is this really because of culture or something else?

Democracy…or not

A third commonly argued theory of effectiveness holds that inherent features within democratic societies are the key factors impacting effectiveness. Under this approach, a multitude of inherent factors within democracies serve as mechanisms that enhance security force effectiveness. Reiter and Stamm suggest that "[a]rmies of democratic states tend to fight with marginally better logistics, substantively better initiative, and superior leadership".[35] They argue that liberal culture encourages initiative. Although soldiers are not more willing to die for democratic governments, the emphasis on individual initiative in democratic culture generates important advantages on the battlefield. Soldiers are more willing to accept battlefield dangers and take greater risks if they perceive a war effort or at least a government reflecting and responsive to their interests. Democratic militaries are more likely to have merit-based promotions than authoritarian militaries which leads to greater organizational effectiveness – something which becomes particularly crucial in providing effective supply and logistics. The fact that democratic militaries are less likely to be hierarchically ordered based on class or ethnic privilege also means that soldiers are more likely to execute their commands.[36]

Biddle and Long offer a set of similar though slightly different features of democratic militaries that encourage effectiveness – democracy inherently produce

[35] Dan Reiter and Allan Stamm, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol 2, No 3 (June 1998), 259.
[36] Ibid, 265.

superior human capital skills, civil military relations, and possess a culture encouraging greater communication and key aspects of military effectiveness. Democracies are much better creators of human capital -- skills, health, literacy rates and educational attainment – than other forms of government. They develop a pool of "educated, able-bodied people large enough to meet the demands for both the military and the civil economy".[37] In terms of civil-military relations they are less likely than other forms of government to have the threat of coups and other cases of highly conflictual civil military relations.

Finally, democracy is also associated with less hierarchical systems with less power distance between subordinates and authorities. Military officers are more likely to have better communication with subordinates because lower power distance creates systems. Officers in democratic militaries are also more likely be technically competent in democracies, while hands on mastery of such details is discouraged in many authoritarian cultures. Lower power distance also makes it is easier to honestly acknowledge mistakes and correct problems whereas high power distance prevents the acknowledgement and/or correction of problems.[38]

The observable indicators for this approach are generally poorly defined as "democracy" or "not." While this may at surface value work for quantitative research to show correlation, its explanatory value seems suspect. First of all, what is actually a democracy and how do we code for it? The field of comparative politics generally presents the range of government types as a spectrum running from totalitarianism to

[37] Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness: A Deeper Look" *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol 48, Issue 4 (2004), 541.
[38] Ibid, 533.

liberal democracy with a large percentage of countries falling somewhere in the middle as “partial” or “hybrid” democracies. Do these apply to any type of democracy?

Additionally, what mechanisms cause these various factors to impact security force effectiveness? Why do different democracies seem to have security forces with varying degrees of effectiveness? Or, instead are some or all of these factors part of another, more comprehensive explanation? For example, Biddle and Long acknowledge that their critics suggest that causation might run the other way and that harmony in civil military relations might impact democracy rather than the other way around.

Politicization

A final line of argument is that variation in military effectiveness is caused by the degree of politicization. The state essentially has three options to pursue in civil-military relations: First, political leaders can choose a “hands-off” approach and let security force leaders control their own sphere, only assigning them tasks when required. Alternatively, political leaders can choose to be heavily involved with organizational decisions regarding their security forces in order to ensure greater effectiveness. Or, finally, political leaders can intervene in organizational decisions for more purely domestic rather than national security considerations – this last dynamic is politicization.

Most international relations scholars take it as a given that states will pursue actions designed to maximize their overall security at all times. However, this is not always the case and a number of scholars have pointed out that many political leaders

intervene in their security force organizations in ways that are clearly counterproductive.[39]

Politicization of security forces generally occurs when the central government seeks to increase its control over security forces to accomplish certain political goals and/or when the government seeks to protect itself from overt military influence or military takeover. This last dynamic has been labeled "coup-proofing" and is the most common form of politicization.

A number of authors in the field of political science have recently examined the dynamic of "coup-proofing" as an aspect of civil-military relations and its role in degrading military effectiveness and we can extend this same approach to the larger dynamic of politicization. Though differing in their emphasis, the field broadly agrees that politicization occurs through the erosion of professional organizational practices in the various security force institutions which in turn contribute directly to poor performance on the battlefield.[40]

While scholars examining politicization or coup proofing of security forces provide a variety of factors to evaluate in measuring the level of coup proofing in a particular state they generally coalesce around the four critical organizational practices

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[39] Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 80; Finer, 2006; Talmadge, 15

[40] Holger Albrecht, "Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes amid the Arab Uprisings, *Mediterranean Politics*, 20:1. (2015), 36-54, James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practices and Consequences in the Middle East." *International Security*. v. 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 131-165; Tobias Bohmelt and Ulrich Pilster, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99." Conflict Management and Peace Science, Vol 28(4) (2011), 331-350; Talmadge, 33.

proposed by Talmadge: promotion patterns, command arrangements, information management, and training regimens. [41]

Promotion patterns reflects the degree to which military leaders are selected for merit. This involves advancement in rank, but most importantly it also involves the selection of personnel for command positions. This recognizes the key role that leaders play in organizational effectiveness. Leaders selected for competence and demonstrated excellence rather than for particular (personal, political, tribal, sectarian, etc) loyalties are more likely to perform better. However, these same leaders may be more likely to resist or seek to change political leadership. Leaders selected for loyalty rather than competence are more likely to follow political direction and are also less likely to seek to topple the regime.[42]

Command arrangements refers to the ability to deliver orders clearly and rapidly. Unity of command rather than competing and redundant orders reduces confusion. Decentralizing operations, initiative and authority to lower tactical levels allows rapid responses to changing battlefield circumstances. However, decentralized units could choose to oppose regime directions or even to seek to overturn regimes. Similarly, the accumulation of power in a centralized chain of command provides a great deal of political power to oppose government direction as well as providing potential coup plotters with access to significant power. In contrast, creating redundant and competing military organizations establishes multiple bases of power more likely to follow

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Albrecht, 36-54; Bohmelt and Pilster, 335; Brown et. al., 3. Talmadge, 16; Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 114; Quinlivan, 133.

government direction as they compete for influence, but also more likely to suffer coordination problems. Additionally, politicized security forces make use of centralized, top-down authority rather than lower-level initiative for the same purpose of ensuring compliance with government direction.[43]

Information management refers to the ability for effective coordination of operations and the diffusion of lessons learned, best practices and related adaptations. Coordination between adjacent units as well as between different components (army, police, air force, etc or simply armor, infantry, aviation) allows the ability to combine the strengths of different units and/or different capabilities. Systems where information and intelligence are shared laterally and at all levels can respond much more rapidly and with greater knowledge than command-driven systems where information must be passed all the way top before being approved for dissemination directly to individual units. However, despite their decreased effectiveness, command-driven systems allow greater control by political regimes, a reduced ability for potential coup plotters to pursue joint planning, and the ability for political leaders to direct certain units for particular political objectives.[44] Another common feature in politicized militaries is the tendency not to report bad news or negative progress.[45]

Finally, *training regimens* provide the opportunity to develop and enhance individual and collective skills. Complex training that simulates potential battlefields, emphasizing realism, initiative, and involving combined arms (ex: infantry, armor,

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[43] Bohmelt and Pilster, 335; Talmadge, 16; Quinlivan, 133.
[44] Brown et. al., 3; Talmadge, 17-18.
[45] Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 115-116.

intelligence), and joint (army, air, police) elements working together is more likely to produce greater effectiveness. However, such realistic training has two potential negative impacts from the standpoint of some regimes. Highly trained forces are more capable of acting to topple the government. Additionally, greater coordination between units in training and on the battlefield makes these same elements more able to coordinate potential coup efforts.[46]

Frequent and realistic training is also often limited so that security forces do not present a threat to the central government. If the only threat to the state is a domestic coup threat, this doesn't present a problem for the state. However, if the state faces an internal insurgency threat or domestic conventional threat then these organizational practices degrade security force effectiveness and may degrade their ability to achieve the state's political goals. [47]

As with many of the previous explanations, arguments for politicization attribute decreases in military effectiveness to organizational factors. However, unlike many of the other explanations, the mechanism leading to ineffective security forces is much more clearly. Finally, it is easier to conceptualize such politicization occurring in many governments around the world, so this seems like a better answer for why we see similar shortfalls in security force effectiveness in different cultures and different governments.

[46] Talmadge, 16
[47] Talmadge, 16.

Commonality – Organizational Practices

One major dynamic that many of the hypotheses describe is a focus on organizational practices within host nation security institutions as an intervening variable. Although there are a number of different arguments for the actual independent variable that is most influential in producing variation in security force effectiveness, many suggest that this occurs by first changing organizational practices, which then in turn contribute to poor battlefield performance.

Additionally, we can see commonality across a number of these theories in the particular organizational practices that impact security force effectiveness. The warrior cultures and politicization approaches both highlight the criticality of effective communications and flow of information. The culture lag and politicization approaches both point to the key role of training. The warrior cultures and democracy approaches highlight the value of decentralized control and initiative, which is similar to some of the concepts in politicization's concept of "command arrangements". Finally, the democracy and politicization approaches both highlighted the importance of merit-based promotions.

Some of these concepts are similar to each other. Grouping them together and further refining the concepts described above allows three critical organizational practices to be operationalized: 1) *promotions and advancement*, 2) *command and control* and 3) *training*.

Promotions and advancement addresses whether the primary factor in leader selection is merit or personal loyalty towards the regime. This involves advancement in rank, but most importantly it also involves the selection of personnel for command

positions. This recognizes the key role that leaders play in organizational effectiveness. This assumes that units run by competent leaders will be more effective on the battlefield. This does not preclude that factors such as patronage or loyalty – or other factors -- might be a factor in selection, but simply means that the most important factor in their selection was the individual leader's qualifications for the position.

Command and control refers to the systems and processes that manage how orders are given and information is passed between different elements in the security force hierarchy. This is a combination of the earlier variables of "command arrangements" and "information management" as both concepts are interrelated. This variable assumes that systems that have a clearly defined (ie non-redundant) chain of command, where personnel are experienced in managing systems facilitating the rapid flow and sharing of information, and where initiative by subordinate units is encouraged will be more effective on the battlefield.

Training involves both formal and informal efforts to develop both individual and collective (group) skills capabilities. Training involves multiple aspects, both formal initial training and retraining of units as well as the informal training of new tactics techniques and procedures through advisors. Finally, for the purposes of this dissertation, this variable includes on the job training - experience gained on the battlefield or during regular operations, the "most realistic" of all circumstances. As discussed above, complex training that simulates potential battlefields, emphasizes realism, initiative, and involves multiple combined arms (ex: infantry, armor, intelligence), and joint (army, air, police) elements working together is more likely to produce greater effectiveness.

Though other practices such as effective logistics are also critically important in the process, they are intermediate processes impacted by these four key practices. For example, though the ability to effectively supply and maintain security forces is a critical requirement, this ability cannot be gained without the promotion of competent logisticians and empowering them to manage supply chain management through effective communications systems and processes.

We can evaluate and measure these three practices as either an ideal "professional" type or a "politicized" type.

Table 1: Observable Indicators

Practice	Professional	Politicized
Promotion / Command Selection	- based on merit before any other factors	- based on perceived loyalty (ie for personal ties or political, tribal, ethnic, religious affiliation)
Command and Control	- unity of command within security force elements - emphasis on decentralizing battlefield execution - coordination between adjacent elements encouraged - combined arms coordination encouraged + evidence of such coordination - systems/procedures in place to allow joint coordination + evidence of such coordination	- competing and/or redundant security organizations - some elite units outside regular military chain of command - political leaders direct operational/tactical activities - command-driven information flow (top-down only) - coordination between adjacent units discouraged, replaced by extremely scripted orders de-emphasizing initiative.
Training	- realistic battlefield focus emphasizing initiative - combined arms and joint coordination present and exercised - both small unit (company and below) and large unit (battalion level and above) events	- highly regimented and scripted or little to no training at all for some/all units - little training beyond the small unit (ie battalion and above) or very little training at all/

The Impact of Organizational Practices Upon Security Force Effectiveness

The relative professionalization of security force organizational practices has a strong and direct impact upon the dependent variable, security force effectiveness. Shortfalls in the level of professionalization serve to degrade overall effectiveness,

depending on the nature and extend of politicization. Professional organizations are the most likely to be able to achieve combined/joint operations. Emphasizing decentralization and coordination and seeking to maximize human capital, they produce the greatest ability for security forces to develop and implement force employment practices taking leveraging modern technology and best practices to move rapidly, inflict maximum damage on the enemy, and limit damage in return. Semi-professional organizations, suffering from varying degrees of politicization, will find it hard to maximize human capital and effectively synchronize various security force components. They are unlikely to achieve a high level of combined/joint operations, but may achieve basic proficiency for individual elements. Politicized organizations will suffer significant degradation in their effectiveness. Unable to coordinate effectively, lacking competent leaders, and hamstrung by their micro-managed command and control systems and limited training, they will be unable to achieve combined/joint operations and very likely to suffer from shortfalls in basic proficiency. Evaluating security force effectiveness is a dyadic relationship. In a particular conflict, the particular effectiveness of combatants are gauged against that of their opponents. In some cases, both may suffer from politicization and the important factor will be the relative degree of effectiveness of the particular security force units or elements at play in a particular conflict.

Held Constant - Weak State Relationships with Their Security Forces

The unstable nature of weak states provides a structural imperative that drives the relationship of weak state governments with their security forces. Before examining this relationship further however, it's important to more clearly understand the term *weak*

state. The foreign policy and development communities frequently use terms such as "weak" or "fragile" states to categorize a variety of shortfalls in the administrative, security or economic capacity of a state. Academic literature, however, generally coheres around certain key concepts that are best described using Joel Migdal's argument in *Strong Societies and Weak States* that state "strength" can be measured on a spectrum based on their ability to 1) penetrate society, 2) regulate social relationships, 3) extract resources, and 4) impose a single set of rules/norms over society.[48] Weak states exist on the lower end of this spectrum, typically face a host of security challenges, and are usually the focus of a significant amount of international foreign policy attention due to the inherent instability which they contribute to the international system.

One of the most basic functions of any state is to provide the security that enables it to maintain a monopoly of violence within its borders.[49] Weak states inherently have shortfalls in this area, making security forces an area of significant concern for their governments. In our international system, most weak states seek to address these shortfalls by maintaining at least some form of security assistance relationship with more powerful patron states. This assistance relationship manifests itself in a number of ways, from financial assistance, access to additional weaponry, training, intelligence, logistics, and/or direct military action by their the patron(s).

Government relationships with their security forces in weak states are influenced first and foremost by calculations relating to the government's perceived control of state

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[48] Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 261.
[49] Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation." Lecture to Free Students Union of Bavaria given in Munich, Germany, January 28, 1919.

power. The primary driver of state action for most governments is the requirement to provide political goods (both physical security and economic well-being) to their core supporters responsible for bringing the government to power.[50] This is true in both democracies and autocratic governments, with the primary difference being that democracies generally have larger groups of supporters to support and protect.

Using this approach, we can assume that governments will intervene in their security organizations when political leaders perceive these organizations as inadequate to ensure the provision of political goods to their supporters. This is the politicization argument above, but driven specifically by the nature of weak states. Government intervention may be due to the internal or external security requirements described above, but – for weak states in particular – the relative competence or lack of competence of the security forces to provide particular political goods may also be defined more broadly. In some cases, weak state governments may perceive that protection of political supporters requires the suppression of political opponents and intervention may be necessary to reorganize their forces to accomplish those goals more efficiently.

The government may decide that intervention is necessary in situations where security force leaders are resistant to being used as pawns to target political opponents in countries that often have only a nascent rule of law. This frequently take precedence in weak states over other external and internal threats. In these turbulent and uncertain political environments, the requirement to gain and maintain political power is a daily

[50] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (PublicAffairs: New York, 2011), 14-20.

struggle much more omnipresent and requiring greater attention than other external and internal threats that might take precedence in more stable governments.

Additionally, many weak state political leaders all too often perceive that strong and capable security forces with the ability to deal effectively with external or internal threats are also organizations that are equally capable of topping the current government. This is not an unrealistic assessment. In an unstable and frequently changing political environment, security force leaders may perceive alternative leadership as providing greater personal and institutional benefits than the existing government. Alternately, military leaders may launch coups based on what they perceive as more altruistic goals. Weak state government capacity is typically chronically weak in the majority of government sectors outside of the military and such disparities sometimes lead to military intervention to "correct" perceived corruption and ineffectiveness in the rest of the government, a concept known as "Praetorianism."[51] Regardless of motivation, whereas conventional wars and insurgencies (particularly in the modern era) generally leave the government in power and take place over periods generally ranging from months to years, military coups are rapid and have a high probability of success.[52]

Given this danger, many weak state governments pursue what are labeled as "coup-proofing" strategies – generally understood by political scientists studying civil-military relations as a series of practices where the leadership of a particular country increases its direct and personal control over tactical and operational decision-making

[51] Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 110-111.
[52] Talmadge, 20.

and decreases the coordination between individual units and services without central political oversight. These same strategies also improve the ability of political leadership to directly control security forces to accomplish political goals that would generally run counter to what is generally construed as the rule of law in our contemporary world.

Due to the prevalence of these factors – government capacity shortfalls, and turbulent societies where government supporters and political opponents are often at odds, and the high potential for military coups – we can assume that most weak state governments will pursue policies that politicize their security force organizations and produce short term benefits for the regime. These efforts by weak state governments to intervene and politicize their security forces will be considered a constant for this dissertation. This interference generates a negative influence on security force effectiveness which outside patrons must work to counter if they seek to increase the capabilities of their partners. But before we examine this negative impact, we need to understand how Security Force Assistance works normally in states where the negative influence of politicization is not present.

Variations in Coup-Proofing: "Republican Guards" and Special Forces

It should be noted that in the course of intervening to politicize their security forces, many political leaders recognize the fact that they need some troops that are more effective than others – frequently as a source of regime protection and sometimes also to accomplish politically sensitive operations, such as the suppression of political opponents or particular population groups. For this reason, many countries that pursue coup-proofing have separated out certain units due to their inherent perceived trustworthiness.

These units represent one of the rival security forces and are usually filled with personnel from trusted populations and promotions are weighted in first favor of political considerations rather than merit. Such forces frequently receive superior training and equipment relative to other forces. Such regime protection forces do not become the entire army, intelligence service, etc – it is still necessary to counter even these forces who could in time come to constitute their own threat to the regime. However, such instances do result in variation among individual units of many states as far as the degree to which specific organizational practices are degraded. While special forces are common elements for such special status, other more conventional loyalist units, particularly elements representing special capabilities (armor, internal security, etc) may be selected.

Such variation allows us to examine variation between different security force units during the same time period. By using this approach we can determine how and why some units might have received greater intervention then others and what the varying impacts were upon these different units.

Patron State Security Force Assistance as an Independent Variable

Despite their crucial significance, host nation governments are not the only elements wielding significant influence in the story of weak state security force effectiveness – the patron states providing security assistance also exert enormous influence. This influence comes in three particular forms. It stems from and is relative to the amount of financial resources provided and access to basic and advanced weaponry support (as discussed above, we generally term this security assistance). It comes from the personnel provided in the form of trainers, advisors, support staff, and partnered

military forces (security force assistance). Finally, in a less directly measurable way it comes in the form of the degree that their superior military prowess is desirable by the security forces of the host nation who seek to emulate their patron's greater effectiveness.

As described above, patron states deliver security assistance for a variety of goals, but this paper will seek to explain the subset of states seeking to increase the security force effectiveness of the host nation. This relationship is a developing area in the present literature.

Mott's Relationship-building Approach:

Until recently, other than the theoretical work on the subject of security assistance as an independent variable from William Mott IV, there was little theoretical exploration of military or security assistance as an independent variable. In Mott's work, a stronger *relationship* achieves the goals for each of the two partner countries. While this is broader than our inquiry, his subordinate factors are useful. Mott opines that the four critical elements of security assistance as related to their overall relationship are: 1) "convergence of aims and interests in giving and receiving military assistance", 2) "degree, type, and level of donor control exerted over the recipient's use of military assistance and over recipient forces supported by military assistance", 3) political will of the donor to commit combat forces to support the assisted country, and 4) the integrity of military assistance with other donor state policies, economic aid, and military strategy.[53]

[53] William H. Mott, IV, *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective*. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press 1999), 267

We will discuss the concept of aims and interests further below, but two of Mott's factors – *patron* (termed by Mott as the "donor" country) *control* and the *commitment of supporting combat forces* – seem particularly relevant to the dynamic of organizational practices and security force effectiveness and will adapted for the purposes of this study. Another, the *integration of whole of government assistance efforts* seems important and a good topic for future research, but will not be examined here as we are examining efforts directly focused on improving security forces. Additionally, as with the previous section on the dependent variable where we expanded *military* effectiveness to *security force* effectiveness, I will modify Mott's approach to include all security force assistance.

Patron Control

The first critical aspect of Patron Security Force Assistance as related to security force effectiveness is *patron control*. Mott states that it is critical for the patron state to maintain and exercise "sufficient control of all resources transferred to promote [patron] interests and adequate influence over the recipient military forces to ensure that their operations achieve donor purposes."[54] It is not simply enough to provide money, weapons and training to the host nation force to be used for the purposes of the host nation government. If professionalization of the security forces is the desired goal, then the degree, type, and level of patron control exerted over the development of the five critical host nation organizational practices detailed above is directly related to their ensuing development towards professional practices.

[54] Mott, p. 267.

Principal-Agent Theory and Patron Control

However, influencing a client state towards professional practices, however, is not as easy as might be implied by Mott's terminology. Among the most persistent critiques of capacity-building efforts by patron states is that they are undermined by three related problems: the *principal-agent problem, adverse selection* and *moral hazard*.

The principal-agent problem – a concept drawn from economic literature and also used extensively to examine civil-military relations – refers to situations where one actor (the principal) chooses to employ or otherwise delegate the performance of particular tasks to another (the agent). Principals usually delegate tasks because agents are seemingly able to perform these tasks more cost effectively and/or with particular efficiencies. In the case of security force assistance, the assumption is that the patron is providing assistance to its client so that the patron does not have to provide security with its own forces (or to eventually extricate itself from the provision of its own forces or at least less of its own forces if it is already providing such security). However, despite expectations and due to a variety of factors detailed below, such delegation to an agent typically brings less than perfect outcomes and performance, and often greater cost savings measures result in even more imperfect performance.[55]

Interest misalignment is always a potential challenge in any principal-agent relationship and this is certainly the case in interactions between sovereign states. While principal and the agent may have similar goals, motivations and understanding of the

[55] Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald and Ryan Baker, Ryan, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol 41:1-2 (2017), 97.

environment in some area, in others they may be quite divergent. These motivations aren't static and may change based on different situations – the principal and agent may see eye to eye on some issues and not on others.[56] Full compliance on the part of the agent cannot be expected.[57]

One of the reasons that patron and client interests often vary is due to the dynamic of *adverse selection* – those countries most needing assistance frequently have a wide range of other problems and are not ideal agents, particularly but not exclusively in counter-insurgencies.[58] Ladwig notes that "effective, legitimate governments are rarely conducive to insurgencies…governments needing external assistance to combat domestic political opponents are almost by definition flawed in some key aspects."[59] What Ladwig is referring to are the weak states that we examined earlier. While the U.S. or other patrons may share broad goals with supported weak state governments by necessity (such as overall state survival), these may be lesser priorities for weak state client governments focused on maintaining power. The client state's pursuit of strategies to benefit its core supporters often puts the two at odds.[60]

Information and the application of leverage are critical in a principal-agent relationship. By virtue of the resources and expertise that a principal possesses, it does have leverage over the agent, but effective application of this leverage is challenging.

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[56] Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 59.
[57] Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency*, (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2017) 26-27, 51.
[58] Biddle et al., 97.
[59] Ladwig, 29.
[60] Ladwig, 30.

Ideally, if principal had complete knowledge of what the agent could or would do, then the agent would act in the desired way.[61] However, separation due to distance, intervening communications systems, different organizational cultures and most importantly, the delegation of tasks to another sovereign (or sometimes semi-sovereign) state creates an information asymmetry between the principal and agent. This allows the client to pursue its own agenda, even if that runs counter to the patron attempting to develop professional practices. The solution for the patron in such a contentious principle-agent relationship is through monitoring and control mechanisms.

Monitoring by the principal in a security force assistance role provides data on the relative progress of the assistance mission. These range from less intrusive measures such as reporting, key leader engagement to more intrusive and increasingly expensive measures such as intelligence operations and the deployment of advisors – first at higher levels of the client and then throughout the organization down to lower levels of command. These intrusive monitoring measures also allow the ability to apply controls – rewards and sanctions to incentivize desired behavior on the part of the agent. Greater levels of monitoring and control give greater influence, but also Biddle et al. More intrusive and a high level of control over the agent (the security force assistance client) allows a greater deal of influence, but is expensive in terms of manpower and resources. However, if only light monitoring and controls are present, the agent may choose to pursue its own agenda.[62]

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[61] Feaver, 61.
[62] Biddle et al, 96.

Ladwig and to a lesser degree Biddle et al, both agree that different types of patron influence (control) strategies produce different results. In general, two different patron influence strategies – inducement or conditionality – are used by patrons to influence agent behavior, with significantly different results. Inducement, the more common method, seeks to influence the client through unilateral, consistent aid and support from the patron to the client. Conditionality, on the other hand, involves a more transactional and contested relationship where the patron withholds specific aid if the client does not take specified actions towards clearly defined goals. Although the latter strategy requires a significant enough commitment to the client to be able to create leverage and may lead to tense and politically uncomfortable confrontations, both Ladwig Biddle agree that the selective reduction of aid via conditionality is more effective than simply supplying more aid.[63]

The final challenge that principal agent theory presents for the concept of patron control is the issue of *moral hazard*. De Mesquita and Smith's assertion that the behavior of political leaders is motivated by their political survival and how weak state political leaders have other incentives than to build effective, professional security forces was introduced earlier. In some cases, strong commitment from a powerful patron can actually serve as a disincentive for action by the client. Ladwig observes that President Kennedy's commitment to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe" unfortunately served as an indication that difficult or distasteful reforms on the part of US security assistance clients was not really necessary

[63] Biddle et al., 94; Ladwig, 299.

because the U.S. would support them regardless.[64] In some cases, this is compounded by the concern that the client will switch its allegiance to another great power competitor of the current patron, giving the client even greater reverse leverage over their patron.[65]

Overall, the principal-agent approach is a useful one for understanding the application of patron control, particularly in weak states. This framework provides a means for understanding the struggle for influence that takes place in these situation and that the ability for a patron state to influence a weak state client is complex and extremely challenging, but not impossible. As Biddle et al. observe, "small footprints mean small payoffs for the US…major results will rarely be possible from minor investments in SFA." [66]

For the purposes of this dissertation, we will not look at the particular means by which a patron state (the U.S.) chose to exercise its influence in a particular situation, but *where* it applied that influence. Rather than examining whether a strategy of inducement or conditionality is occurring, we will determine whether or not this influence was directed at particular practices. We will seek to look within the control and monitoring measures to see what was the focus of influence and to what degree the "influencers" (advisors and partnered units) were used. From this we will seek to determine their impact upon particular organizational practices and then subsequently through these organizational practices upon the security force effectiveness of units in combat.

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[64] Ladwig, 37; "Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy" (January 20, 1971) retrieved from "The Avalon Project", Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp.
[65] Ladwig, 62.
[66] Biddle et al., 95.

Relationship of Security Force Assistance with the Intervening and Dependent Variables

At this point, we must pause to acknowledge that (unlike host nation government intervention) security force assistance directly impacts *BOTH* the intervening and dependent variables. It applies both to the development of organizational practices as well as directly to security force effectiveness in a more tactical/operational sense. The participation of patron forces in a partnered manner in support of host nation forces is often essential to tactical and operational success. Such assistance provided in direct support of host nation forces has immediate and clearly recognizable impacts. This is closely related to one of the important takeaways from this study – *capability substitution* – a concept which will be introduced in the analysis of the studies.

The purpose of this study, however, is to determine how and if patron state security force assistance produces variation in the security force assistance of the host nation, not in how actions of the patron state forces on the battlefield influence the outcome of a particular battle. Depending on the opponent, direct field support may be important to allow host nation forces to survive in the short term long enough to develop into an effective security force. However, any gains produced will be fleeting unless the organizational practices of the host nation can be professionalized to provide sustained and lasting improvements to security force effectiveness.

Operationalization of "Patron State Intervention" as an Independent Variable

For this reason, the relationship of the patron security force assistance to host nation organizational practices is the more critical as politicization from the host nation

government is negatively impacting security force organizational practices. Because of this – except where specifically noted below – much of this direct relationship upon the dependent variable will not be addressed and greater emphasis will be placed on the relationship of security force assistance to the more critical intervening variable, organizational practices.

Commitment of Patron State Combat Forces

The second critical aspect of Patron Security Assistance is the nature of the *commitment of patron combat forces*. It is included and relevant here because the commitment of combat forces has immediate tactical benefits that also have long term organizational practices of the host nation. Patron state security forces will not always be committed directly in support of the host nation. However, in some cases, the patron may determine that the security situation of the host nation is dire enough to warrant the commitment of patron combat forces either as advisors, in direct support, or as partnered military forces with major combat units directly participating in security operations. The nature of this supporting intervention has direct impacts upon overall security assistance due to diversion of patron security assistance resources to these new missions.

Although Mott perceived the simple fact of the commitment of patron combat forces as a positive factor in achieving patron aims, this is not necessarily the case for the creation of security force effectiveness. If the commitment of patron state combat forces develops into operations largely independent of the host nation, this has negative impacts upon the overall contribution of security assistance. These operations consume the majority of resources and patron state effort in addition to drawing the most the most

qualified personnel who might otherwise serve as advisors or trainers. Host nation security forces never receive sufficient resources to develop into sustainable, and professional (and competent) organizations.

A slightly less negative, but still not optimal outcome occurs where the patron state gears its assistance efforts towards the development of host nation forces as a supporting arm for patron state combat forces. The security forces develop as non-sustainable adjuncts to patron combat forces. Security force development is a "secondary effort". Again, many of the best and brightest patron state personnel will be drawn to the "main effort" of patron state operations rather than into developing the organizational capacity of a professional host nation security force.

The optimal role for the commitment of patron combat forces is in a partnered manner in support of host nation security forces. Though host nation security force capabilities might be quite nascent at first, development of these forces becomes the priority effort for the patron state. Combat operations are integrally designed to include host nation forces. Overall efforts are designed to create a sustainable force and as development of the organizational capacity of host nation security forces becomes a priority, higher quality personnel are assigned and seek assignment to such positions. Operating at this close proximity has the highest chance of inducing the host nation to emulate the successful practices of the patron state. As the rationale and means of implementing individual organizational practices and the nature of professional ethos that binds them together become more apparent to the host nation forces serving closely

together with more professional patron state forces, they are more likely to seek to emulate those same practices.

How Should Security Force Assistance (Normally Work)

So far I have advanced the concept that security force effectiveness is an output of organizational practices by the host nation. We have also seen how particular organizational practices – promotions/advancement, command and control, and training and education – are critical elements that can be modified by politicizing governments to produce security force *in*effectiveness. In social science terms these are intervening variables that impact our dependent variable, security force effectiveness. If researchers have provided a causal link for how a government's manipulation of organizational practices can have a negative imp act on security force effectiveness, then this should similarly be the case for security force assistance from a patron state seeking to *improve* effectiveness.

The three charts on the right side of this page and the following page show how targeted security force assistance can produce positive changes in the client state if focused on these key organizational practices. Three practices can be directly impacted by security force assistance and can be judged as either "professional" or "politicized" (which we

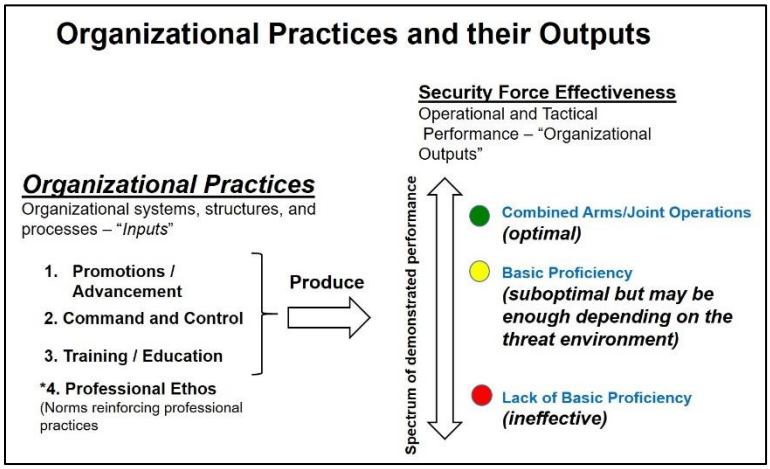

Figure 4: Organizational Practices and their Outputs

will consider to be the natural state of less effective security force organizations). *Promotions and advancement* involves officer promotions and command positions. Is the primary criteria merit based or loyalty based? For *Command and Control* are security force institutions hierarchical structures with decentralized execution and lateral information sharing or are they redundant and competing security services? Are *Training and Education* activities and programs battle focused (ie is training conducted in field conditions with combined arms) and emphasizing initiative and reaction or are they limited, highly scripted, and generally conducted in a garrison environment? Over time, as these practices move from a politicized status to a professional status (the first set of descriptors given (ie merit-based, hierarchal/decentralized, and battle/initiative-focused) above, the military will gradually develop its professional ethos where security services will act as professions (self-policing organizations contributing to society).

These practices will only move from a politicized to a professional status if they are targeted for intervention by security force assistance. Security force assistance that is not targeted at improving multiple organizational practices will not produce significant change. This is consistent with U.S. security force doctrine, which emphasizes that the entire organization must be

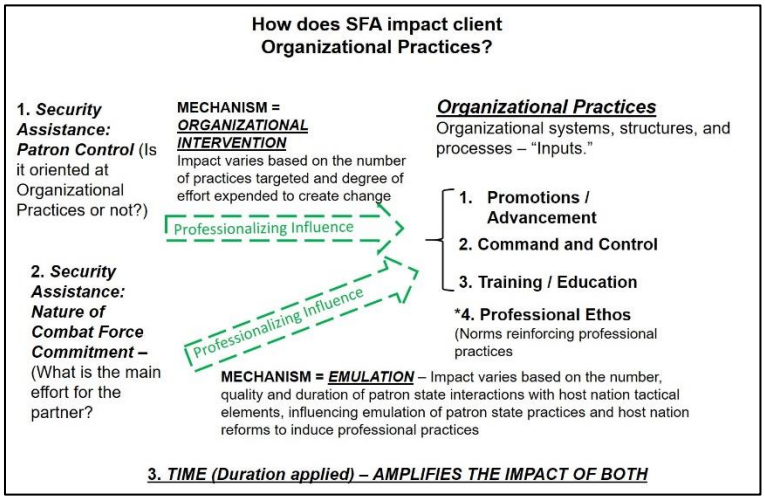

Figure 5: How Does SFA Impact Client Organizational Practices?

addressed with multiple programs and that the longer these programs are applied, the greater chance of success.

Bearing this in mind, Security Force Assistance produces results in the client state depending on two variables, 1) the nature of Patron Control and 2) the nature of Combat Force commitment. *Patron Control* is the primary way that host nation organizational forces are impacted. Change occurs through the mechanism of *organizational intervention* in the client state security forces.

For purposes of this model, *organizational intervention* means direct patron state influence that produces change in the host nation organizational practices. As used here, intervention speaks to results – we are not talking about cases where the patron tried to produce change but failed. This does not necessarily mean that the patron state *forces* change, although this may be necessary though use of [quid pro quo] conditionality. For our purposes, Organizational Interference means that patron state influence (whether through showing the client other ways of doing things, inducing them through gifts, or forcing them through conditionality) produces significant change. If security force assistance is directly targeted at influencing changes in the three critical organizational practices, than the impact will vary based on the degree of effort expended to create changes. The more practices and more resources that are targeted, the greater the likelihood of change. Of course if the patron state simply gives non-targeted assistance without seeking to intervene and influence change in these practice, little change will occur.

The second way that security force assistance produces results is through the commitment of combat forces. Combat Force Commitment works through the mechanism of *emulation*. The experience of working alongside more professional forces from a patron state can be a great influence on the assisted forces of the client state. Combat Force Commitment works through the principle of "the greater the interaction, the greater the level of gain." This impact varies according to the number, quality, and duration of patron state interactions with host nation tactical elements. From this interaction, client state security force members learn new ways of doing things. Over time they will be promoted and gain positions of influence within their organizations. As more client state individuals that have learned new ways of doing things occupy positions of prominence in their organizations, they will enact changes in their organizational practices from within.

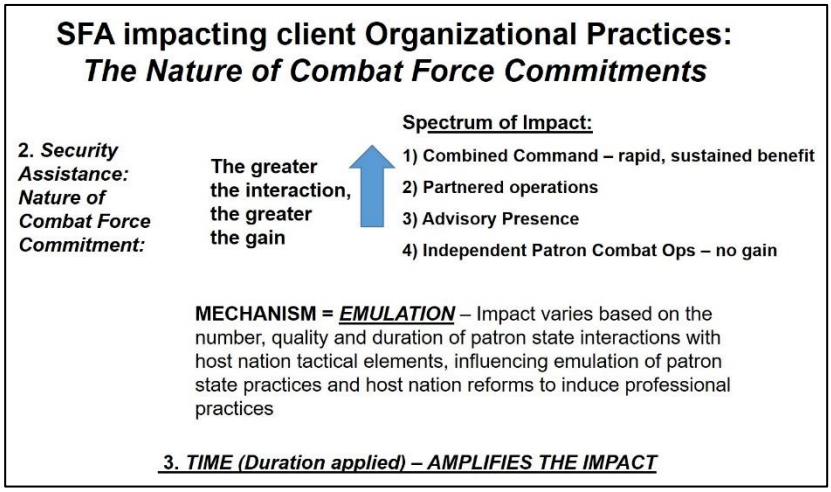

Figure 6: The Nature of Combat Force Commitments

The spectrum of impact depends on the nature of the commitment. If patron state forces are committed for *independent combat operations*, working on their own to get things done faster, although the patron state may find this simpler, little benefit occurs because there is little opportunity for emulation. If patron state forces are committed as

advisors, they begin to make an impact depending on the number of advisors that are committed. Advisors, however, are limited in number. They can only touch so many lives through emulation. By contrast, *partnered operations* between patron state and client state security forces expose a much greater number of client state individuals to the more processional practices of their patrons. Depending on the duration, such operations may begin to make significant and more rapid improvements. The opportunity for the greatest level of impact is c*ombined command*, where the two security forces work together in the same command structure. An example of this would be the Korean War, where Republic of Korea forces served under the U.S. (United Nations) command, providing the greatest level of sharing and understanding of why the patron state operates the way it does for the client state forces serving alongside and under them.

The final variable is time. The longer that these interactions occur – whether patron state intervention in host nation organizational practices, or emulation occurring due to exposure to the superior host nation practices of a patron state – the greater the chance that they will positively impact the client state's organizational practices and thus produce positive changes in security force effectiveness.

How Security Force Assistance Actually Occurs in Weak States

While the model presented above describes the way that security force assistance works in normal situations, the politicizing influence exerted by the host nation government in weak states makes this a much more challenging endeavor for the patron state.

In cases of security force assistance to weak states, the politicizing influence of the host nation government is strong and aimed directly at its own security force organizational practices. This does not, however, mean that the patron state does not have influence. Depending on the level of commitment, the patron state may have enormous influence over the resources supporting the client state as well as extensive interactions throughout all levels of the supported security force organizational structure.

Exerting influence in such situations may be quite challenging for the patron state. As described earlier, U.S. security cooperation doctrine generally seeks to focus on overlapping areas of agreement, weak state governments may have some quite divergent policy goals, at least initially. In some cases, patron state leaders may made placed extensive political commitments to the success of their endeavor which give client state leaders reverse leverage through "the threat of defection, the invocation of shared sacrifice, and the threat of collapse,"[67] However, this does not mean that it cannot or has not been done successfully. Historically, Walter Ladwig argues in the *Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency*, the U.S. has had little success with influencing client states in SFA relationships with strategies of "inducement" – providing unilateral aid and strong public commitments to the client without any strings attached. However, other examples such as U.S. support to the Philippines in the Huk rebellion in the 1950s show that the U.S. *has* been successful in influencing clients when it followed

[67] Walter Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 62.

strategies of "conditionality" – providing targeted assistance only when certain clearly defined goals had been met by our partners.[68]

As the example in the last paragraph demonstrates, "challenging" does not equate to "impossible." This dissertation will further examine these dynamics to better understand the mechanisms involved in producing variation in outcomes for these situations.

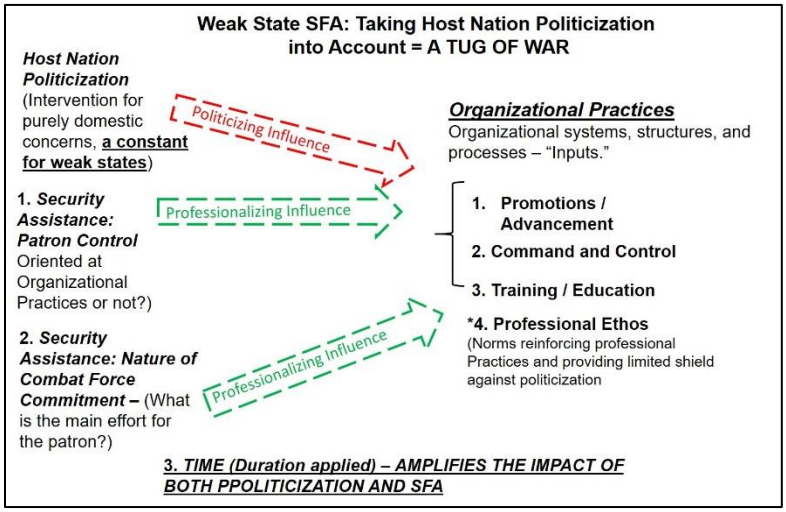

Figure 7: Taking Host Nation Politicization Into Account = A Tug of War

The chart at right shows the tug of war for effectiveness that occurs in security force assistance to weak states, where professionalizing influence from the patron is in play against politicizing influence from the client government. In such cases, it is critical that patron state organizational intervention targets multiple practices with a commitment of extensive resources and time. Ladwig's argument for conditionality in SFA becomes critically important if the patron state truly wants to influence change in its client. If comprehensive and extensive SFA efforts are not targeted to change the organizational practices, then assistance efforts are unlikely to produce any kind of lasting change in the client security forces.

[68] Ibid, 299.

In such situations, combat force commitment alone will not produce results on its own. Only combat force commitment accompanying sustained efforts aimed at each of the organizational practices is likely to produce results. The commitment of combat forces (if done correctly through strategies emphasizing partnering or combined command) will, however, greatly amplify the impact of organizational intervention as the significant influence of emulation is added alongside these efforts.

The most important and critical initial task for situations of weak state security force assistance is for the patron state to realize that they are in such as situation in the first place. A light touch approach that might work for SFA to stronger states has no chance of success for replication in weak states if the patron truly wants to achieve meaningful and lasting improvement in security force effectiveness. However, a more comprehensive, targeted (and almost certainly long duration) approach has the chance of producing the kind of changes that will result not only in improvements to the three primary organizational practices, but to the supporting professional ethos. When applied alongside more comprehensive capacity building efforts that target other sectors of government capacity, the chance for moving the client from a weak state to a stronger state without the same drive to politicize its security forces also increases.

Table 2: Individual Variable Observable Indicators

Indicator	Targeted Assistance	Partially Targeted Assistance	Generally Untargeted Assistance
Patron Intervention	- assistance efforts directly targeted to improve each of the critical organizational practices and sufficient resources/patron control to achieve sustained improvement - efforts successfully made to counteract politicization by host nation government	- assistance efforts directly targeted to improve *some* of the critical organizational practices - limited / temporary efforts made to counter host nation politicization of organizational practices	- Patron provides money, weapons and training to the host nation force to be used for the purposes of the host nation government as the host government determines
Nature of the Commitment of Patron Combat Forces	- patron and host nation forces working side-by-side sufficient to adequately support and allow diffusion/ emulation of best practices - The commitment of patron forces is staged to allow the roll-out of sufficient security force capabilities by the host nation	- development of host nation forces programmed primarily as a supporting element for patron combat forces	- the patron state prioritizes the commitment of combat forces for independent, non-partnered operations

Combining these factors, we can rate overall security assistance as "Comprehensive," "Constrained", or "Unsustainable". *Comprehensive* security assistance involves both indicators. It is the most likely to produce lasting professionalization in host national organizational practices and produce sustainable improvements in security force effectiveness. Ineffective security assistance will consist of ineffective indicators for both indicators. Improvement in organizational practices is unlikely and little sustained improvement can be expected in security force effectiveness. *Constrained* security assistance ratings exist in between these extremes. Improvement in organizational practices may occur temporarily and may produce temporary gains in security force effectiveness, but these are unlikely to be sustainable. Unsustainable may see gains on the battlefield due almost exclusively to the efforts of the host nation, but any improvement in security force effectiveness will be, as the title suggests, unsustainable and security forces are more likely to degrade in effectiveness.

Brief Commentary – Expanding upon Biddle and Talmadge

This dissertation draws heavily and expands upon the previous work of Stephen Biddle and Caitlin Talmadge. With his "modern systems" approach, Biddle provides an excellent framework for understanding military effectiveness at the tactical and operational level. Although he confines his analysis to conventional warfare, I have shown above how we can conceptually envision this same approach for counter-

insurgency warfare as well, thus providing a holistic measure for military effectiveness in most types of warfare that would apply to weak states.[69]

This dissertation also closely follows Talmadge's approach in *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*. Confining her approach to authoritarian states, Talmadge argues that the prioritization of threats by national leadership leads to their respective strategies towards military development. Essentially, most authoritarian states prioritize coup threats over all others and the degree of fear of these threats drives corresponding levels of interference in four organizational practices – promotion patterns, command arrangements, training regimens, and information management. The degree of interference in these practices impacts her dependent variable, battlefield effectiveness at the tactical/operational level, which has two separate components - complex operations and basic proficiency. Interference in all four practices will produce poor battlefield effectiveness ("ideal-typical coup prevention practices"), in only one or two practices will produce adequate battlefield effectiveness ("mixed") and no interference will produce excellent battlefield effectiveness ("ideal-typical conventional war practices"). [70]

I take a slightly different approach to Talmadge's exception regarding state survival. Implicit within her overall argument is an exception that authoritarian states do not always prioritize coup proofing. In The *Dictator's Army*, Talmadge argues

[69] This approach excludes conflicts exclusively fought through cyber warfare or nuclear warfare – high technology endeavors beyond the technological capacities of most weak states. It also largely excludes the unique aspects of conflicts solely involving naval warfare, again not a significant component in conflicts between many weak states.
[70] Talmadge, 37.

alternately that state's will argues that because state's prioritize survival, they will gravitate towards more professional organizational practices when the threat of conventional war rises or for certain particular cases where units' locations far away from the capital make them less of a threat.[71] By contrast, this dissertation argues that, because of the nature of weak states, politicization is a constant variable driving government interactions with their security forces' organizational practices.

Unlike Talmadge, however, I do not see this as the ONLY variable, but rather argue that patron states in security force relationships have tools of their own that allow them to pull organizational practices in a different (more professional) direction, depending on their application. From my standpoint this explains some of the inconsistencies in Talmadge's explanation of effectiveness of South Vietnamese I Corps units during the Vietnam war, which will be detailed below in this dissertation's South Vietnam Case Study.

Talmadge's contributions are highly useful and I have attempted to refine and expand upon her work in developing my dependent, intervening, and first independent variables. As I have indicated in the previous section on security force effectiveness, interference can only produce a degree of degradation, it cannot produce excellent, adequate, or poor effectiveness in and of itself. I have thus deviated from Talmadge's original work and created my own spectrum of effectiveness where the degree of politicization degrades the baseline security force effectiveness. For ease of understanding by western military and policy audiences, in some cases I have modified

[71] Talmadge, 23, 61.

some of her terms to make them more in line with standard US military doctrinal terms – thus *command arrangements* becomes *command authority* and *complex operations* becomes *combined/joint operations*.

As discussed earlier, I have also expanded my approach to include all security forces – not just militaries themselves - since many conflicts today involve forces beyond those traditionally construed as purely "military." Additionally, I have expanded from simply focusing on coup proofing to the broader concept of "politicization" – as discussed I do not believe that coup-proofing is necessarily the only goal of political interference, particularly when we expand from authoritarian governments to include the spectrum of pseudo-democratic and more fully democratic structures that exist in weak states. Otherwise I have tried to build upon her existing terminology to provide a standardized way of approaching the field.

The one glaring issue that Talmadge excludes in her approach is the impact of foreign security force assistance. Her examination of the Vietnam war as one of two critical case studies disregards the enormous impact of the United States upon South Vietnam. Weak states do not exist in a vacuum. They often draw upon the support of powerful patrons who have their own interests and who can exert significant influence over weak state security forces. My second independent variable, detailed above, seeks to account for that influence.

CASE STUDY INTRODUCTION– US SUPPORT TO SOUTH VIETNAM (1954-1973)

US Support to South Vietnam: Case Study Overview

In our common American understanding of the Vietnam War, the performance of South Vietnamese military forces often takes a back seat to a brief analysis of the military performance of French forces (during the First Indochina War running roughly from 1945 through 1954) versus their Viet Minh opponents and then detailed analysis of American forces (essentially from 1965 through the fall of South Vietnam in 1975) versus North Vietnamese and Viet Cong opponents. Popular perceptions generally consider the forces of South Vietnam, on behalf of whom the US had intervened, as wholly corrupt and ineffective. This, of course, would be why South Vietnam collapsed shortly after the US withdrew its military forces and much of its aid in 1975.

While it is certainly true that South Vietnamese forces did suffer from extensive corruption and politicization throughout the war, they also experienced significant, although uneven, improvement in their effectiveness during the conflict. As the US began its "Vietnamization" drawdown in 1969, this uneven improvement had resulted in some South Vietnamese units and commanders up to division level that demonstrated the ability to integrate combined arms, particularly the use of modern air support, in combat operations against the enemy. By 1972, this improvement had risen to corps level, with the newly installed leadership of I Corps directing a combined arms counterattack that

retook all captured territory in northern South Vietnam against numerically superior North Vietnamese forces. Yet alongside this improvement are numerous cases of ineffective South Vietnamese units unable to perform their basic missions and commanders incapable of coordinating the various battlefield elements integral to modern warfare.

Why does such variation occur? As the Vietnam War was the longest commitment of US military forces to date and US security assistance contributed billions of dollars over two decades in an attempt to create capable and independent security forces, the lessons learned from this conflict are important to understanding future assistance efforts. This next three chapters will examine U.S. security force assistance to South Vietnam from 1954-1973 to better understand these dynamics. Over two decades, this security force assistance mission would transition from a training, advising, and equipping role, to commitment of major US combat forces, and then to a partnering and advisory role.

For purposes of analysis, this study will divide the case into three phases based on the level of US commitment and internal dynamics of the South Vietnamese government. Each will be discussed in its own chapter:

- Chapter Three: South Vietnam Phase 1 – Training and Advising (1954 - 1964) The remainder of this chapter will examine U.S. security force assistance to South Vietnam under the Diem Govt up to an extended period of coup instability.

- Chapter Four: South Vietnam Phase 2 – US Intervention (1965-1968) – Following President Diem's assassination, a period of coup instability produced the

virtual collapse of the South Vietnamese government and North Vietnamese conventional military incursion, prompting the extensive commitment of US ground and air forces to the conflict.

- Chapter Five: South Vietnam Phase 3 – Vietnamization (1969-1973): Transition of the war effort from US leadership to South Vietnamese primacy.

- Note that a final phase, "*Abandonment*" could be considered to run from 1973-1975, after the US withdrew all combat troops and dramatically reduced its security assistance funding to South Vietnam, and eventually ending with the Republic of Vietnam's collapse in 1975 following a massive invasion from North Vietnam. However, as the primary focus of this study is the interaction of security force assistance and politicization upon security force effectiveness, this period will not be covered.

The Players

The South Vietnamese

A number of contending players participated in the U.S. phase of the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1973. On one side was South Vietnam – the Government of Vietnam (GVN) and supporting forces. These include the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), trainers and advisors primarily drawn from the US and Australia, and intervening combat forces primarily drawn from the US, Australia, and South Korea. This study will focus on the RVNAF and US involvement and not the supporting role provided largely under US direction by Australia and South Korea.

The RVNAF functioned ostensibly under the command of the Joint General Staff (JGS), and this paper will discuss how the command and control system evolved over

time and US influence. Underneath the JGS were arrayed independent commands for the Army (the Army of the Republic of Vietnam or ARVN), Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Airborne forces as well as the four Corps tactical zones (CTZ) which were operationally responsible for controlling forces throughout Vietnam. Additionally, administrative commands responsible for South Vietnam's armored battalions, ranger units, special forces, military police, and territorial forces also reported to the JGS, although in practice these forces were assigned to the various corps and down to individual division headquarters.[72]

The ARVN vs. the RVNAF – a key distinction

A central element in the conceptualization of the dependent variable in this dissertation, security force effectiveness, focuses on the degree to which client security forces are able to effectively combine combined arms and joint operations (the various security force components) on the battlefield. Because of this, this dissertation makes an important distinction between the ARVN and the RVNAF. During the conduct of the war and in many subsequent publications, these terms were (and still are) often used interchangeably when referring to South Vietnamese ground forces other than the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.

This is a case of 'mirror imaging' – attempting to conflate the organization of the patron state – the United States military – with the actual structure of the South Vietnamese military. The South Vietnamese JGS was originally organized as an army headquarters. When capabilities were later added into the authority of this command and

[72] Clarke, 26.

control structure they still retained a significant amount of independence from other elements – they didn't fall administratively under the Army or other services as would be the case in the United States military of the time or the U.S. military today. This made the South Vietnamese ability to integrate these various elements more challenging – and so understanding which forces are ARVN or RVNAF is thus important. When this dissertation discusses the regular divisional elements of an Army of Vietnam division (all were infantry divisions), they will be referred to as ARVN units. This includes armored forces, because these generally operated exclusively under the command of other forces, usually but not exclusively ARVN divisions. Although Ranger and Airborne force often operated under the operational control of ARVN commanders, they were distinct units, with a different command structure. Similarly, Corps level commands are referred to as RVNAF. This is an important distinction to which the reader should pay close attention.

The North Vietnamese and subordinate South Vietnamese communists

In opposition were the forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), operating under a single, unified command from 1958 onward. The first of these was the Peoples' Army of Vietnam (PAVN), also known as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA. The PAVN was the regular army of North Vietnam, which over time would send conventional infantry, artillery, and eventually, armored forces, into South Vietnam. The second, under North Vietnamese direct command, but composed largely of South Vietnamese was the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), also known as the Viet Cong. The PLAF was composed of both guerilla ('local force') elements as well as

more purely conventional ('main force') infantry units.[73] Throughout the conflict, North Vietnam benefited from extensive security assistance in the form of equipment, money, and training (but not combat advisors) from the USSR and People's Republic of China.

Again, despite popular misconceptions, Vietnam was not simply a guerilla war fought by conventional forces against irregular forces. The decisive actions in this conflict involved small or large unit actions between conventionally organized forces. This allows us to utilize the model introduced earlier without modification. The ability of South Vietnamese force to succeed or fail in what various authors call the "Big Unit" or conventional war would ultimately decide their existence.

[73] David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac Vietnam: They Did Everything But Learn from It,* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 54.

CHAPTER 3: SOUTH VIETNAM PERIOD I – U.S. ADVISING (1954-1964)

Variable Analysis:

US Combat Forces Committed: **Advisors, later increasingly augmented with combat support forces after 1961**
Primacy of US Military Force Mission to: **Advising**
Advisors down to what level: **Initially none – down to battalion/province level from 1961 onward**
Successful Organizational Intervention in Training: **Yes**
Successful Organizational Intervention in Command and Control: **Limited**
Successful Organizational Intervention in Promotions: **No**
Exemplar Battle: ***Ap Bac* (January 2, 1963)**

The US assumed primacy for providing training and advisory assistance to the newly established Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) from the French in 1955 as the Diem regime consolidated its power over a variety of internal opponents. When Peoples's Liberation Armed Forces (Viet Cong) guerillas began to increase their presence in South Vietnam, the commitment of US advisors able to provide US air support and helicopter transport gave RVNAF units a critical early edge on their adversaries. However, as small-scale guerilla opposition turned into more concerted conventional opposition in the 1960s, weaknesses in the RVNAF became more apparent and they were not able to adapt as quickly as their opponents.

Overview

The July 1954 Geneva peace agreement ended the nine-year First Indochina War between the French and Viet Minh forces and partitioned the former French possession of

Vietnam along the 17th Parallel.[74] A communist government under Ho Chi Minh began rapid consolidation of power in the north, while Emperor Bao Dai, the nominal previous ruler of Vietnam under French colonial rule was given sovereignty over the South. In forming his government one month before the signing of the peace agreement, the ineffectual Bao Dai named Ngo Dinh Diem as his premier, ceding him total control over all military and civilian matters.[75]

In contrast to the more consolidated North, Diem had a much more limited hold on power. As Diem attempted to form a nationalist government in the South, he struggled to consolidate power against a number of armed groups and gangs and even the leaders of his own military. The new nation of South Vietnam inherited from the French a fairly large, although poorly trained National Army of almost 150,000 men and auxiliaries and a small Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) with three squadrons of observation and light attack planes.[76] Unfortunately, although withdrawing, the French were actively working to undermine Diem and still maintained significant influence over these former colonial forces as well as 150,000 of their own troops still remaining in the South. Finally, the irregular armed forces of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects and the armed gangs of the Binh Xuyen militia – all forces which the French had relied on to fight the Viet

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[74] Mark Moyar. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29-30.
[75] Moyar, 33.
[76] Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, D.C.; United States Air Force: 1981), 36; Ronald H Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S Army in Vietnam 1941-1960* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 225.

Minh – exercised de facto control over large parts of the country and had strong ties of their own to the French.[77]

Within a month of taking power, Diem faced a crisis of leadership as the French, Bao Dai and sect leaders plotted to replace him with the Army Chief of Staff, GEN Nguyen Hinh. With American pressure on the French to withdraw their support, Diem was eventually able to fire Hinh and replace many of his supporting officers. [78] This control was crucial in allowing Diem to weather his next challenge.

In March 1955, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen announced the formation of a "United Front of Nationalist Forces" to oppose Diem and demanded the dissolution of his government. Although Bao Dai informed U.S. embassy officials that Diem was an ineffective leader and United Front leaders sought their support, the Americans affirmed their support for Diem and opposition to anyone seeking to overthrow him.[79]

Tensions came to a head when Binh Xuyen forces attacked National Police and National Army forces in Saigon on March 29th. Although the French Army's deployment of 30,000 soldiers and tanks to block key streets and intersections in Saigon caused a temporary cease fire, their interference also alarmed U.S. leaders in Vietnam and in Washington. When U.S. government pressure forced the withdrawal of French forces after several days and with the backing of his US military and CIA advisors, elements of the Airborne Brigade and other supporting National Army forces launched a series of

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[77] Moyar, 41-42.
[78] Moyar, 41-44; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: A History of the Vietnam War from a Military Man's Viewpoint* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 12.
[79] Spector, 243.

rapid operations that quickly destroyed all Binh Xuyen forces in Saigon.[80] After a short campaign lasting several months, the National Army, supported by VNAF observation planes, destroyed the remainder of Bin Xuyen forces in Vietnam.[81]

Despite Diem's victory, the United Front was not willing to concede. In May 1955, four Hoa Hao generals declared war on the central government and sent 16,000 troops into the wilderness near the Cambodian border, believing they could avoid the National Army's conventional strength with a guerilla campaign. This also proved ineffective. Beginning on June 5 and continuing through the end of 1955, a series of offensive operations encircled the various Hoa Hao commanders and one by one they either surrendered their forces after negotiations or fled to Cambodia.[82]

As military operations against these armed groups were continuing, Diem completed his consolidation of power by holding a referendum in October 1955 to either declare South Vietnam a republic and thus remove Bao Dai as head of state – or oppose the republic and remove Diem. In advance of the referendum, Diem deployed the National Police and National Army to smother pro-Bao Dai support while simultaneously mounting an aggressive pro-Diem propaganda campaign across the country. Unsurprisingly, Diem received 98.2% of the total vote. [83] He had successfully defeated all internal rivals to gain control of power.

Diem now set about cementing his control. Using family connections, Diem placed one brother, Ngo Dinh Can, in control of the critical city of Hue and surrounding

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[80] Vien, "Leadership," 279.
[81] Futrell, 37; Moyar, 47-53
[82] Moyar, 53-54, Vien, "Leadership," 279.
[83] Moyar, 54-44.

areas in the north. His second brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, became archbishop and primate of Vietnam. His third brother Ngo Dinh Nhu became Diem's principle advisor. Using his brothers and their extensive loyalty networks, Diem developed increasing control over the police, the army's officer corps, and the civil bureaucracy.[84]

Amidst the campaigns of 1955, the U.S. began training and equipping the new Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. With Ho Chi Minh building a large military in the North and concerns of an invasion, the original American commitment to fund a Vietnamese military of 94,000 was soon increased in mid-1955 to build an army of 150,000 as a national reaction force (comprising four infantry division, six more regionally focused light divisions, an airborne "group" of five battalions, four armored cavalry regiments, and 13 territorial regiments with supporting artillery, signal and transportation units), and a small Air Force and Navy, each with 4000 personnel.[85]

From 1957 to 1959 the National Army, now renamed as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), was further restructured into seven larger infantry divisions arrayed from north to south under three Army corps headquarters – with I Corps headquartered in Da Nang guarding the north, II Corps in Pleiku guarding the Central Highlands, and III Corps in Saigon responsible for the south.[86] The Air Force expanded slightly to a force of 1 fighter squadron, two transport, and two observation squadrons while the navy

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[84] Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 47-48.
[85] Futrell, 39; Khuyen, 6; Vien, Cao Van and Khuyen, Dong Van, "Reflections on the Vietnam War," In *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals*, edited by Lewis Sorley, 831-884. (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1980) 832.
[86] Collins, 9.

remained a small and generally ineffective force of light patrol craft.[87] The overall authorized size of the RVNAF still remained at 150,000.

With the MAAG ostensibly organizing and training conventional military forces for the role of defending against North Vietnam, President Diem formed two additional forces aimed directly at maintaining stability and local defense of the population – the Civil Guard (CG) and the Self Defense Corps (SDC).[88] In a 5 May 1955 presidential decree, President Diem established the Civil Guard –regional forces to enforce the law and maintain public order and security in rural areas. Primarily focused on counterinsurgency and internal security, CG units fell under the direct control of the province chiefs and the administrative control of the office of the president.[89] The CG were designed to be the loose equivalent of Italy's *Carabinieri* – a uniformed but lightly armed quick reaction force able to provide security and restore public order were necessary. To accomplish this, the were organized with individual companies and platoons reporting to the province chiefs and several mobile battalions operating as a general reserve under a central headquarters in Saigon.[90] Along with their counterinsurgency capabilities, this force also provided Diem (either directly for the general reserves or indirectly through his control over provincial chiefs) with a potential counter-coup force staffed with loyal ARVN officers, although the CG were more lightly equipped than their ARVN counterparts.[91]

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[87] Futrell, 49-50.
[88] Futrell, 37.
[89] Toczek, 40-41.
[90] Collins, 10.
[91] Toczek, 40-41.

The local counterpart to the CG was the Self Defense Corps (SDC), established in 1956 to provide static, lightly armed and non-uniformed forces to maintain order and security at the local level by securing individual hamlets and villages. Drawn from their local villages, these small, poorly armed and generally untrained elements (ranging anywhere from squads of four to ten to occasionally company sized forces approaching a hundred men) were designed to provide local security by preventing subversion or intimidation.[92] When faced with a challenge beyond their capabilities, they would rely on the more mobile Civil Guard units operating throughout the province and who were also responsible for processing any prisoners sized by the SDC.[93]

Although Diem had surprised the world with his ability to successfully stabilize South Vietnam, the remainder of the 1950's saw the gradual increase of an external threat to his rule that would prove much more challenging. After witnessing Diem's consolidation of power, North Vietnamese leaders realized that gaining control of the South would likely require violence. Although their Chinese patrons concurred, China was still recovering from the Korean War and did not want a major war on their hands for the time being and thus directed the North Vietnamese to avoid significant provocation. Accordingly, the North began a campaign seeking to destabilize Diem's control of the South while building their own shadow political organization. Simultaneously they began training the thousands of southerners who had gone north in 1954 and formed them into the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), also known as the Viet Cong. [94]

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[92] Collins, 10.
[93] Toczek, 41-42; Collins, 10.
[94] Moyar, 61.

At the end of 1956, North Vietnam initiated a selective campaign designed to intimidate or eliminate rural leadership tied to Saigon. Assassinations increased in 1958 and then 1959.[95] Rather than gaining the support of the population, however, this served largely to alienate much of the population. With Diem's government forces gaining increased controls over rural hamlets, the communist party cadre and leadership numbers in South Vietnam fell from 60,000 in 1955 to only 5000 in 1958.[96]

Having failed to destabilize South Vietnamese with their harassment campaign, in 1959 the North Vietnamese unleashed the Peoples Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), southerners who they had trained in the intervening years. Cadres infiltrated South Vietnam to form both 'local force' guerilla units to challenge government control at the district level, as well as more regularly armed and organized 'main force' units to combat the RVNAF.[97] Assassinations and kidnapping rates skyrocketed over the first five months of the 1960.[98] Alongside these terrorist attacks, the PLAF's organizational structure expanded rapidly and soon it was operating at the battalion level, with its first two regiments organized in 1961.[99] In platoon, company, and on a few occasions in battalion strength, the PLAF ambushed RVNAF units – predominately CG and SDC, but also lone ARVN units as well – and raided isolated outposts.[100] By l963, the North began to follow its southern cadres with northern cadres and troops as well.[101]

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[95] Moyar, 79.
[96] Moyar, 79-80
[97] Lung, "Strategy and Tactics", 96.
[98] Moyar, 91.
[99] Lung, 97.
[100] Costmas, 14.
[101] Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," 97.

Over time, RVNAF units of all types began to experience losses against the PLAF, with small units – both CG, SDC and ARVN consistently losing small engagements due to poor training, weak leadership and low morale.[102] The situation was only worsened by U.S. Ambassador Durbrow's decision to defund the SDC militia, which he believed Diem did not need.[103] Government control of some rural areas became virtually nonexistent.[104]

In October 1961, Maxwell Taylor, special advisor to the President, travelled to South Vietnam and reported the Diem regime was losing the war because of poor tactics and administration. President Kennedy denied President Diem's request for U.S. combat forces but did authorize the significant expansion of US advisory and training assistance, the provision of U.S. helicopter and transport aircraft to provide airlift for South Vietnamese forces. South Vietnam became the highest priority for U.S. aid and America committed to providing everything necessary to defeat the rising insurgency short of combat troops. By the end of 1961, American combat support units began arriving in Vietnam, the U.S. authorized a 20,000 man increase in the size of the RVNAF, and U.S. special forces began arriving to train the RVNAF's specialized Ranger battalions in counterinsurgency tactics.[105]

To command and control its expanding forces in Vietnam, the U.S. activated Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in February 1962 with authority for all policy, operations, and assistance in South Vietnam, including advising the government

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[102] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 14.
[103] Moyar, 91.
[104] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 14.
[105] Collins, 18; 24.

of South Vietnam on all security related issues. MACV was co-equal with the U.S. Embassy, which retained responsibility for political and basic policy issues. The previously existing Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) remained a separate element responsible for training and advising, but subordinate to MACV.[106]

The increase of American advisors, armored vehicles, air transport, and combat aviation support dramatically increased battlefield success for the RVNAF in 1962. This began a cycle which would repeat itself several times over 1962 and 1963. Each new provision of U.S capabilities resulted in a several months to half a year of battlefield successes, but each new capability was eventually met with PLAF battlefield adaptations or with the North Vietnamese flooding increasing resources into South Vietnam. [107]

The U.S. provision of the M113 armored personnel carrier, M24 tanks and M8 armored cars to the ARVN along with advisors to assist in their employment gave the South Vietnamese the capability to move more rapidly, even across rice paddies, and with enhanced protection.[108] The rapidly expanding deployment of US helicopter transport companies gave the RVNAF the ability to deploy rapidly onto the battlefield. This enhanced mobility and firepower at first was a shock to the PLAF, until they developed new tactics to counter their use. The Americans responded by fielding helicopter gunships which again gave them an edge for a while.[109]

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[106] Collins, 28.
[107] Toczek, 44.
[108] Toczek, 44. Although the M113s experienced great difficulty crossing the steep banks of the canals that bordered rice paddies, particularly in the Mekong Delta region.
[109] Toczek, 44.

Meanwhile, as regime deficiencies worsened over time and popular discontent rose, the military became increasingly discontented and attempted to remove Diem, despite the president's extreme coup proofing efforts. On November 11, 1960, three battalions of the Airborne Brigade along with supporting armored personnel carriers under the command of COL Nguyen Chanh Thi attacked seized the airfield and its critical fighter assets and then attacked the Presidential Palace.[110] Although they almost succeeded in killing President Diem, an armored battalion was able to race to the scene and protect the palace. However, the coup was not ended until elements of the 5th and 21st Divisions arrived after a multi-day stand-off and restored order by defeating the airborne forces in a bitter street battle. The U.S. ambassador's attempts to reach a compromise between the coup plotters and Diem earned the U.S. the lasting distrust of the South Vietnamese president, whose paranoia towards his military leadership only increased after the event.[111]

This was not the only military threat to Diem. In February 1962, two dissident VNAF pilots in A1 Skyraiders attempted to kill Diem by bombing the Independence Palace.[112] President Diem became increasingly suspicious of his government and military leaders and the Americans, leading him to concentrate still more political and military

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[110] Ky, 28; Spector, 368-369. COL Thi was the same commander who had led Diem's Airborne forces in defeating the Binh Xuyen in 1955. Until the coup, he had been considered one of Diem's most loyal commanders.
[111] Moyer, 108-113.
[112] Ky, 29.

power under either his personal control, with close family members or in a shrinking circle of sycophantic retainers.[113]

While Diem, a devout Catholic, had long been accused of oppressing the Buddhist population and their politically active leadership, in August 1963 his repressive tactics created a national outcry that doomed his regime. After a series of anti-government demonstrations, Diem ordered his Special Forces to seize a number of Buddhist religious centers in Saigon, with thousands of monks, nuns and protesting students and teachers arrested in a violent crackdown. His heavy-handed treatment outraged many government officials and military officers, some of whose children had been manhandled and arrested. It also caused a complete loss of support from the U.S. and the international community – which had already been critical of Diem's authoritarian policies.[114]

In late August, 1963, a group of generals led by Diem's senior military advisor, LTG Duong Van Minh and including acting JGS chief LTG Tran Van Don, JGS executive officer LTG Tran Thien Khiem, II Corps Commander LTG Nguyen Khanh, and 5th Division commander MG Nguyen Van Thieu began plotting a coup. [115] The coup plotters were in touch with U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and President Kennedy was aware of their planning efforts. [116] Lodge first attempted to persuade Diem to get rid of his highly influential brother and senior advisor Nhu and form a more liberal

[113] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 12.
[114] Vien, "Leadership," 275.
[115] Nguyen Cao Ky. *How We Lost: The Vietnam War*, New York: Stein and Day, 1978), 36
[116] Moyar, 241.

government. After this effort failed, the coup plotters received support from CIA agent COL Lucien Conant as they continued their tactical planning.[117]

On Nov1, 1963 the coup was launched. Pro-coup forces arrested the commanders of the Airborne and Marine brigades, the Special Forces, the police and the Civil Guard,[118] Forces commanded by 5th Division commander MG Thieu seized key communications infrastructure while two marine and two airborne battalions backed by armored forces and a flyover by VNAF T-28s overcame the presidential guard at the palace.[119] Diem had evaded this attack, but surrendered himself to coup forces after talking to the US ambassador, who pledged his safe conduct out of the country. Shortly after being arrested, however, Diem and his brother Nhu were murdered by the police that seized them.[120]

Diem's overthrow prompted a period of extreme government instability for South Vietnam that lasted several years. For much of this time, RVNAF leadership was largely consumed with factional infighting as a series of military or military-backed governments rose and fell from power. None of them able to fully consolidate power, however, and all were challenged in maintaining order. Not only their own competitors, but pressure from militant students and the politically powerful Buddhist leadership proved difficult to manage. Additionally, mounting battlefield losses seriously weakened the legitimacy of each of these governments. MACV and the U.S. embassy maintained close relations with

[117] Ky, 36
[118] Moyar, 267.
[119] Ky, 39-40; Moyar, 265-267, 271.
[120] Ky, 41; Moyar, 272-273.

each of these governments, no longer choosing to interfere or challenge their legitimacy out of concern that each of these fragile governments would collapse.[121]

Following the military coup against Diem, a Military Revolutionary Council headed by LTG Minh took over the government. However, this regime proved short lived and was replaced after three months by an Armed Forces Council led by another of the initial coup planners - former II Corps commander LTG Nguyen Khanh, who served as chief of state and premier. Unable to gain sufficient support for one-man rule, Khanh then brought LTG Minh back into a ruling triumvirate along with LTG Tran Van Khiem.[122] In September 1963, IV Corps commander LTG Duong Van Duc attempted to gain power by seizing Saigon, but his attempted coup was foiled by the threat of VNAF air strikes.[123]

By November 1964, an emerging group of younger RVNAF leaders known as the "Young Turks" supplanted this triumvirate and established an "Armed Forces Council" that remained highly influential behind the scenes while placing two civilian politicians from the Diem administration, Phan Khac Suu and Tran Van Huong - as chief of state and premier as a figurehead government in an attempt to maintain a veneer of democratic legitimacy. However, these two leaders were unable to maintain order and under pressure from students, political parties, and increasingly powerful Buddhist leaders, the Armed Forces Council replaced Huong as premier with another civilian politician, Phan Huy Quat in February 1965.[124]

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[121] Moyar, 294-297.
[122] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 2.
[123] Ky, 49-50.
[124] Khuyen, 7-8; Moyar, 362-363.

This seemingly never-ending cycle of power struggles and political infighting in the senior ranks of the RVNAF had a devastating impact throughout the institution. Unit commanders were more focused on establishing loyalty to a rotating cast of government leaders for their personal benefit rather than managing their units and fighting the enemy. Because of this, some onlookers called this period "the captains" war because it was left to the RVNAF's junior officers to manage an increasingly desperate situation. Lacking motivation and poorly led, the RVNAF units were consistently outmatched by their more disciplined and determined opponents and in outlying areas territorial force commanders began to make "live and let live" agreements with their PLAF adversaries.[125]

In 1964, North Vietnamese leaders increased their level of commitment by infiltrating their regular Army units – the People's Army of Vietnam – alongside the PLAF in an effort to overwhelm the RVNAF. Although they had achieved a number of successes that were wearing the RVNAF down, the PLAF was also beginning to fray and their forces were experiencing just as many – if not more – desertions than their government opponents. With increasing American advisory and air support the RVNAF was beginning to win battles again, although at a high cost. Simultaneously, the terrorist campaign against the populace was beginning to harden popular opinion against the North.[126] Accordingly, regimental sized PAVN formations began crossing into the border areas of South Vietnam, while sending their soldiers as individual replacements to existing PLAF units, which were now grouped as regiments and divisions. On South

[125] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 3.
[126] Palmer, 86-87.

Vietnam's long border with Laos and Cambodia, the PAVN rapidly expanded their logistics infrastructure along the 'Ho Chi Minh' trail in order to quadruple the flow of supplies and manpower to their forces in the South.[127] Once again RVNAF forces found themselves under pressure as they gradually lost de facto control of more and more areas of the country.

Patron Intervention: Training

As discussed in Chapter 2, training involves multiple aspects, both formalized initial training and retraining, field exercises or command post exercises practicing the maneuver and integration of entire units, and the informal training of new tactics techniques and procedures through advisors. Another form of training is "on the job training" – experience gained during the course of regular operations. The U.S. effort to build a competent RVNAF was doubly challenging. First it involved the development of a fledgling military almost from scratch and second, much of this development occurred while the new military was simultaneously involved in increasingly heavy combat operations.

The United States first established a joint Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon, Vietnam in September 1950. The army, navy, and air force sections of the MAAG were tasked with observing France's operational use of the extensive assistance (military equipment) which the U.S. was providing to the French counterinsurgency effort against Viet Minh guerillas seeking to secure independence

[127] Moyar, 297-299, 308; Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 1.

from colonial rule.[128] As the French encountered increasing problems dealing with the Viet Minh, the U.S. assistance mission took on an increasing role in equipping French forces. Following the partition of Vietnam, Washington finally agreed to calls from the MAAG, the State Department, and the French (which had been ongoing for more than a year) to help train the Vietnamese Army and a small joint US-French training mission working under the MAAG was officially authorized in December 1954 and in place by February 1955.[129] Additionally, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG-V) was formed out of the previous organization which had been responsible for all of In dochina.[130]

The French had begun slow steps to form a Vietnamese Army in 1948 as a colonial force to support their ongoing counterinsurgency against the forces of Ho Chi Minh. By 1950, a small force of sixteen thousand men was organized into twelve battalions. The majority of command positions were held by French officers, with only three battalions exclusively officered by Vietnamese. The French considered the fledgling force unreliable and devoted little resources to the new units, which were mostly used for static defensive operations.[131] Although the U.S. had pressured the French from 1952 onward to allow the U.S. to fund forty new "light battalions" to be trained according to the same standards that the U.S. was using for the South Korean

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[128] Mutual Defense Assistance: Indochina – Agreement between the United States of America and Cambodia, France, Laos, and Vietnam, December 23, 1950, 4 in *The American Journal of International Law* Vol. 48, No. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (Jul., 1954), 133-137, https://www-jstor-org.usawc.idm.oclc.org/stable/2213961(accessed 2 April 2019); Spector, 115-117.
[129] Spector, 239-240.
[130] Collins, 2.
[131] Spector, 131; 222.

army at the end of the Korean War, the French resisted the effort. [132] Towards the end of their involvement the increasingly desperate French did begin to form a sizable Vietnamese force, although training for all but a select few units was still largely neglected.

By the time the U.S. assumed responsibility for training the Vietnamese in 1955, the National Army of Vietnam, had – on paper – a strength of 150,000 men plus 35,000 auxiliaries organized into 125 individual battalions. Despite the paper strength of this force, most of the battalions of the fledgling army were understrength and poorly trained.[133] The sole exception were a few airborne battalions which had fought alongside the French in the final battles of 1954.[134] Additionally, since they had originally been formed as an auxiliary to support the French Expeditionary Corps rather than conduct independent operations, the new military lacked combat support and combat service support elements[135].

The initially joint U.S.-French training mission agreed to a six-month period for the withdrawal of French officers from the new force. Diem's clashes with sectarian forces in late-spring accelerated this process, and the French increasingly took a decreasing role in the overall training process until the last of their advisors departed in 1956.[136] Although limited in numbers, the early U.S. training mission split into two elements – one that advised the Ministry of Defense, General Staff, and services; and

[132] Spector, 162-164; 180.
[133] Spector, 225
[134] Spector, 225, 259.
[135] Spector, 259.
[136] Spector, 252.

another that assisted and advised corps and division headquarters, training centers and installations. Augmented by rotational training teams from the United States, the small staff sought to develop a conventional army of divisional units and supporting forces able to provide internal security and respond to external attack by 1 January 1956. In building the RVNAF, the United States relied on its successful recent experiences training South Korean forces in its efforts to organize and train the South Vietnamese.

While the Diem regime viewed its new local and regional paramilitary forces as an important part of local security, the MAAG initially saw the CG and SDC as little more than rural police and focused their efforts exclusively on training the regular forces. A civil guard training program was developed by the Michigan State University group and civilian contractors were hired to assist in developing the CG and SDC into territorial militia and police forces with little success.[137]

As communist insurgents became an increasingly serious threat, however, the MAAG realized the importance of the paramilitaries to local security. They convinced Diem to place these forces under the Ministry of Defense in 1960 and the MAAG immediately dedicated advisors to the JGS' new Civil Guard directorate to help with training and equipping these forces, although funding for the CG and SDC still was paid by the U.S. International Cooperation Administration. In 1961, the MAAG finally began to fund these forces under the Military Assistance program and their discipline and morale began to slowly improve. [138]

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[137] Lawton Collins, Brigadier General, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, (Washington D.C., Department of the Army, 1975), 3-4.
[138] Ngo Quang Truong, "Territorial Forces," In *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals*, edited by Lewis Sorley, 178-214 (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1980) 188-189.

The training mission's plan had been to utilize mobile training teams along with a national training center to run the entire regular force through a series of individual, basic unit and advanced training. Simultaneously, a series of provincial training centers were established to train the paramilitaries.[139] Unfortunately, the poorly trained and equipped paramilitaries were unable to accomplish these missions, requiring the new Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) to constantly pull units out of training to meet operational requirements.

The initial entry training structures were able to keep up with the increasing inflows of new recruits needed to fill the ARVN's new divisional structure from this early period through the end of the war. However, the quality of instruction for ARVN basic training was generally considered inadequate and would remain so throughout the war. Although the basic training system was paid for by the Americans it was run by the South Vietnamese and suffered from three primary challenges. First and most importantly, training duty was seen as far less important than combat duty in the RVNAF – the leaders and instructors sent there were often "the undesirables" or with little combat experience, leading to a lack of quality training.[140] Second, RVNAF training methods emphasized lectures on the manuals and very little time was devoted to more beneficial practical instruction such as hands-on weapons and maintenance training, field movement and live fire. Finally, the need for replacement soldiers in the field led to periodic

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[139] Collins, 12-13.
[140] Robert K. Brigham, 2006, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 34.

reductions in training throughout the war, resulting in soldiers frequently arriving in their units unable to perform their basic duties.[141]

The new force suffered from a lack of properly trained leaders at all levels. The former colonial practices of the French had generally limited native promotions higher than junior officer. This created a new force where the majority of Vietnamese personnel initially occupying command and staff positions above the company level were initially untrained and lacked the requisite experience to perform their new positions. While new officers benefitted from effective training (in contrast to the enlisted basic training discussed above) at the Reserve Officer Training School at Thu Duc and the new National Military Academy at Dalat, their seniors did not.[142]

Although an extensive system of military schools was eventually developed, this also suffered from the same challenge of operational requirements preventing effective retraining. The US and allied countries did provide an overseas program training limited numbers of key officers and specialists in the US and overseas. However, the numbers and impact of this program were limited.[143] Many of the most senior generals including future President Thieu and future JGS chief General Vien were able to attend U.S. Army educational courses at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.[144] However, the bulk of RVNAF officers would eventually reach the rank of Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel with their

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[141] Brigham, 34-36.
[142] Dong Van Khuyen,"The RVNAF," (1980) In *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals*, edited by Lewis Sorley, 4-94, Texas Tech University Press: Lubbock, TX. 2010, 17.
[143] Collins, 14-15.
[144] Huong Ngoc Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," (1980) In *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals*, edited by Lewis Sorley, 95-131, Texas Tech University Press: Lubbock, TX, 2010), 113.

officer basic course as their only formal military training – a vast difference from their American military officer peers who had attended multiple mandatory training and education courses over the course of their careers.[145]

At the unit level, the Army also suffered from a lack of experienced enlisted personnel, particularly non-commissioned officers (NCOs) – the backbone of any army who serves are critical element in ensuring that individual soldiers are trained and providing a continuity of experience within a unit. The National Army that fought under the French had increased to 200,000 personnel by 1954. However, following the 1954 Geneva Accords, the U.S. initially refused to pay for such a large force, resulting in nearly 60,000 men – primarily enlisted infantrymen and NCOs – being discharged in the first five months of 1955 before the MAAG agreed to pay for a larger force. By then over 6000 NCOs as well as a number of experienced soldiers who would have later become NCOs had left the force. This was a critical loss of experience with a significant long- term impact, particularly from the late 1950s onward as the expanding RVNAF found itself continually short of qualified and experienced infantry NCOs – the type of soldiers it most critically needed.[146]

The inability to conduct concurrent training for units in the field was a significant impediment for the newly formed RVNAF. Most units were in a constant state of flux and in need of retraining due to frequent desertions and combat losses. However, these same units were constantly pulled in different directions to deal with a deteriorating

[145] Khuyen, 17.
[146] Khuyen, 19.

security situation. Individual training for new recruits could not compensate for deficiencies in the units to which they reported. Operational units consistently demonstrated weaknesses in combined arms and the use of air support, but did not have the time to conduct training maneuvers necessary to improve. This occurred concurrently with a steadily increasing internal threat as greater numbers of PLAF infiltrated down into Vietnam from the North and expanded their local infrastructure.[147]

The lack of RVNAF experience led to a lack of flexibility and difficulty with picking up new skills. As an example, ground force commanders gave little attention to develop a capability to call in airstrikes from their small air force. Instead, the majority of airstrikes performed by the VNAF were called in by their air force personnel in L19 observation aircraft.[148]

Although U.S. military and contracted mobile training teams were able to travel throughout the force and deliver training based around newly translated US Army Field manuals, the methods they sought to instill were adopted only sporadically and reluctantly. By 1958, the constant interruptions caused by operational requirements and limited number of trainers had either prevented training or caused major interruptions preventing successful training for a number of divisions, the airborne brigade and all of the territorial units comprising the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).[149]

The inability to correct unit training deficiencies in the face of an expanding and improving opposition led to a security situation where U.S. assistance leaders recognized

[147] Collins, 34-35.
[148] Futrell, 55.
[149] Collins, 12-13.

by 1959 that the RVNAF was losing to a growing insurgency.[150] In May 1959, the Commander of U.S. Pacific Command directed the MAAG to begin providing permanently assigned advisors down to the infantry regiment and separate battalion (armor, artillery, marine) level. Although forbidden to directly participate in combat operations or accompany units on operations adjacent to national boundaries, this provided a much greater ability for advisors to provide on the spot input.

In 1959 – against MAAG opposition - President Diem directed the ARVN to reorganize in order to meet the evolving demands of counter-insurgency warfare. The fourth company in each ARVN infantry battalion was pulled out and re-designated as a "Ranger" company.[151] From the American advisory command's standpoint, this requirement took many of the most experienced officers and men from the regular units. Instead, MAAG Chief Lt Gen Williams argued the task of dealing with the growing insurgency could be more effectively dealt with by training all existing regular and paramilitary forces to meet this evolving requirement, improving counterintelligence capabilities, and establishing a clear chain of command.[152]

Nevertheless, the establishment of the Ranger companies went forward. At first these small units, approximately 10,000 strong in total size spread across South Vietnam, were little different than their regular peers. However, over time greater training was available for them and they would eventually (years later) become a key component of the security effort. In 1960, a national ranger training center was established at Danang

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[150] Collins, 16-17.
[151] Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," 108.
[152] Vien, "Leadership," 274.

and by 1961 all sixty-five Ranger companies had received additional training. 1961 also saw the arrival of U.S. Army special forces mobile training teams tasked with providing counterinsurgency training to these units, providing a significant boost in trained forces able to meet the expanding PLAF threat.[153]

Over the course of 1961, the Kennedy administration took steps to significantly expand U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. In May, Kennedy's Presidential Action Program authorized the expansion of the MAAG, military assistance program support for the CG, and more special forces training teams to assist in training the new Vietnamese Special Forces. In December 1961, the U.S. administration announced a new counterinsurgency program for Vietnam that dramatically expanded U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.[154]

Under the new program, MAAG personnel strength was further expanded and advisors were now provided down to the battalion level for operational level as well as for each province chief. These advisors were now authorized to accompany their South Vietnamese counterparts during combat operations. Six ARVN and nine CG training centers were constructed to assist in training newly activated ARVN regiments and new CG recruits. Priority was given to training Ranger units, the CG, and the SDC, and the new Vietnamese Junk Force – the small navy assigned to protect Vietnam's coast.

Despite the MAAG's plan to focus on training the paramilitary forces that were the first line of defense in the counterinsurgency campaign, actually accomplishing this

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[153] Collins 17, 20.
[154] Collins, 24; Futrell, 53.

task was difficult. Since there was no recruit training program until 1964, without training these forces were essentially armed bands of young men or private armies "federalized" into the service of provincial chiefs. Despite the establishment of the new CG/SDC training centers (soon expanded from nine to twenty-six of South Vietnam's thirty-eight provinces), the provincial chiefs who controlled these forces were reluctant to release them for training because of local security conditions. Additionally, since the provincial chiefs reported directly to the President rather than through the formal military chain, pressuring the RVNAF military apparatus had little influence over this process, should they have cared to do so. By the end of 1964, most of the CG (now renamed as "Regional Forces" or RF) companies had been trained, but this was two years behind the original goal of 1962 and only one-third of the 533 companies had been through required retraining by 1964. SDC units (now renamed as "Popular Force" or PF) lagged even further behind despite a similar priority focus. Although training time for these locally based units was cut in half from twenty-four weeks to twelve weeks, more than half of all units and leaders had not been trained.[155]

A more successful program was the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program begun by the CIA and U.S. Army Special Forces in December 1961. The CIDG program sought to organize and recruit the ethnic minorities of central South Vietnam and Laos into local defense organizations to protect their villages, watch the border and provide general intelligence on enemy activities. This also prevented the recruitment of these same minorities by the communists. By October 1963, mobile special forces teams

[155] Collins, 42-43.

had trained over forty thousand hamlet militiamen and sixteen thousand mobile strike force members.[156] Despite their usefulness in fighting the rising insurgency, however, these forces had little ties to the South Vietnamese government and their loyalty lay instead to the U.S. special forces that trained and equipped them. This remained a source of tension with the South Vietnamese government – which was concerned that these forces would later turn against them – for the remainder of the conflict.

Despite all of these efforts, unit level training continued to be a problem through the end of this period (ie through 1964) as it had from the beginning. Despite increased force levels, increased enemy activity made it difficult to bring entire units together. Consequently, the unit training centers established by the U.S. were heavily underutilized, even though American advisors continued to report that low levels of training were a leading cause of combat ineffectiveness. The major outlier for training were the Ranger battalions, which maintained a continuous retraining program and were generally rated as much more effective.[157]

One of the examples in the impact from this lack of unit training occurred in the increasing use of helicopters to provide air mobility for combat forces. The ability to move by air gave the South Vietnamese a significant advantage over their guerilla adversaries. However, U.S. advisors regularly complained that ARVN were reluctant to off-load helicopters and then bunched up and failed to disperse on the landing zone. Similarly, U.S. flight crews reported that South Vietnamese pilots were unfamiliar with

[156] Collins 40-41.
[157] Collins, 34-35.

basic loading and unloading procedures.[158] All of these factors were driven by an unfamiliarity with the new means of transportation which could have been alleviated by dedicated training.

Advisors brought key US capabilities that increased the battlefield performance but were slow in producing structural changes. RVNAF leaders often remained resistant or ignored advise that didn't suit them. Due to lack of language proficiency and familiarity with Vietnam, many had trouble knowing what was going on in their units, making it difficult to influence their counterparts. MAAG leadership discouraged unfavorable advisory reports on RVNAF units that might reflect poorly on the MAAG performance (and their evaluations). Without accurate reporting, an understanding of the depths of the fundamental weaknesses across the RVNAF were not available for a long time.[159]

Throughout this period, development of RVNAF ground forces was the overwhelming priority for the MAAG. Little effort was given to the training or equipping of South Vietnam's small Navy and Air Force. These forces remained much smaller, poorly equipped and poorly trained, with the U.S. providing air and naval capabilities where needed.[160]

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[158] Collins, 36-37.
[159] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 12.
[160] Collins, 9.

Patron Intervention: Command and Control

As detailed in the overview, Ngo Dinh Diem had to struggle with divided loyalties in his military and potential coups from his senior military leadership immediately upon becoming Premier (later President) in 1954. Diem was able to consolidate power by weeding out potentially disloyal elements and installing loyalists in key positions. These early experiences established a baseline of distrust and desire for control that never left him. As the RVNAF expanded, Diem's extensive control and micromanagement of all facets of military and civilian government represented significant obstacles to the development of an effective system to command and control security force operations.

The first MAAG challenge in developing RVNAF command and control was a structural one. By strictly following the Korean model, the system that the Americans helped create had been placed alongside an existing structure built around three regional commands tasked to coordinate internal defense that had been established in late 1954 to duplicate replace their French predecessors. The new corps headquarters were tasked with essentially the same role as the preexisting regional headquarters – territorial security. The regional commands had additional administrative and support responsibilities within their zones and the corps had a more direct command relationship over the ARVN divisions, but this nevertheless presented a challenge in executing security operations. However, MAAG leaders perceiving themselves (correctly) in a tug of war with Diem to build their vision of a trained and professional military modeled along traditional western military organizations and drove single-mindedly towards their

desired model.[161] Although they later worked to consolidate and build efficient processes, throughout the 1950s MAAG leaders were generally unwilling to compromise and see what might be effective or useful within the pre-existing structure or some of Diem's proposed solutions (such as the CG and SDC).

In many ways the evolving South Vietnamese military was beginning to take on the shape of a conventional military oriented to meet external threats that its American patrons sought to achieve. However, the reality of a force that soon became focused primarily on internal threats and most importantly of a military subservient to a distrusting and highly controlling national leader (Diem), created important differences in the organizational and command and control structure above and around these tactical units.

At the national level, the RVNAF Joint General Staff (JGS) had developed out of the Army General Staff (established in 1952) of the Vietnamese National Army when South Vietnam had become independent.[162] Given the RVNAF's overwhelming focus on land forces, the JGS served as both an Army staff and an interservice staff. The JGS Chief was also the Army Chief of Staff. Within the JGS were separate commands for armor, artillery, engineer, signal and transportation. The logistics directorates remained directly under the Ministry of Defense rather than the JGS, making support to ongoing operations challenging.[163]

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[161] Spector, 265, 268.
[162] Vien and Khuyen, 835-835.
[163] Khuyen, 6.

In March 1960, the MAAG was finally able to convince the Vietnamese government to approve a new national planning system giving the chief of the JGS responsibility for the security of South Vietnam. Despite this authority in principle, however, the JGS's influence remained limited and President Diem retained tight personal control of all military and civilian activities of the government. [164]

From top to bottom, multiple problems impacted effective RVNAF command and control. Although mostly hierarchical on paper, the reality was a bewildering case of conflicting, duplicating, and overlapping channels of command and control. A division commander might receive orders from both his corps commander as well as the region commander. The division's subordinate infantry, armor, and artillery units might receive tactical orders from their branch chiefs on the JGS. Most alarmingly, President Diem maintained a personal radio net in the garden of his presidential palace and would sometimes give operational orders directly to individual combat regiments, bypassing the intervening levels of the Ministry of National Defense, JGS, Corps/Region, and Division commanders.

This convoluted system was not limited to the ground forces. In order for the small Vietnamese air force to strike ground targets, approval had to be gained from the province chief, region chief, JGS – and in some from Diem himself. Concerned with potential political blowback from air strikes, the president directed that targets for air strikes had to be designated by observers that were not only technically competent, but considered politically liable. Such high-level control of the application of airpower

[164] Vien, "Leadership," 313-314.

added significant delays and greatly limited its usefulness, particularly in responding dynamically to the sort of hit and run guerilla raids that were generally launched by the PLAF in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[165] U.S. BG Lawton Collins later assessed the overall contradictions in this system were a case of deliberate design managed by Diem "to hamper coordination, rapid staff action and decision-making."[166]

As U.S. assistance expanded in 1961 and 1962, a number of major organizational changes were made. A Vietnamese Marine "Corps" (VNMC) of three battalions was created. Separate Army, Navy, Air Force, and Special Forces commands were established under the JGS and a Joint Operations Center was established to better allow the JGS to perform its function of controlling military operations. [167]

To alleviate the confusion in coordination and better achieve unity of command in a deteriorating security environment, in 1961 the three military regions were dissolved. In their place, the three existing corps field headquarters and a new fourth corps were placed in charge of four new Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs), running from north to south.[168] A separate Capital military district with its own special command was also established. CTZ's were further divided into Division Tactical Areas (DTA's), each with one or often multiple provinces for which that division was responsible. In the case of multiple provinces, each was designated as a 'sector.' The Corps and division Corps headquarters

[165] Futrell, 55.
[166] Collins, 10-11.
[167] Collins, 29.
[168] IV corps was created by splitting the third military region area in the south in half. III Corps remained responsible for the areas surrounding Saigon (which was a special military administrative area) and the provinces to its west. The IV Corps assumed responsibility for the Mekong Delta provinces to the south.

were now responsible for both mobile operations as well as territorial security within their CTZs and DTAs.[169]

On paper, this made sense and was a rational way to allocate security responsibilities when facing an insurgency. However, despite the official chain of command created under MAAG sponsorship, Diem often still intruded in the local security operations in the same way that he always had. The assignment of the corps and division headquarters to fixed areas of territorial responsibility also would have serious long-term effects. Military forces became static and bound to the areas in which they had been based for the duration of the conflict. Rather than creating a situation where territorial forces could maintain local security in the manner that Diem had originally imagined (although the CG and SDC weren't actually capable of performing this mission), with regular forces in a mobile role, the RVNAF quickly became a force where almost all of its forces were static other than a small national reserve (the Airborne and later the Marines).

Simultaneously, the Diem administration began to slowly replace civilian officials with military officers as district and provincial chiefs in areas where security had deteriorated and then increasingly throughout Vietnam. When military governments succeeded Diem after 1963, they completed this process. It was believed that military officers were better prepared to handle the tasks of pacifying these areas in a country at war while simultaneously dealing with other administrative issues.[170]

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[169] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 183-184.
[170] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 184.

Unfortunately, this action had two negative impacts. First, rather than improving unity of command this often created dual and often conflicting chains of command for many security operations. Second, the district and provincial chiefs were untrained and inexperienced in the government administrative tasks they now faced and overwhelmed with balancing these with the security tasks that were also their responsibility. The end result was to the detriment of both local security and provincial administration – a severe problem in any insurgency, where the first task of government is to maintain the security and support of the population.

Despite the theoretically optimal solution of securing local populations at the lowest level with forces drawn from and living in those villages, towns and provinces, the reality of the CG and SDC fell far short of their objective. Existing outside of the regular military structure, the CG and SDC presented both a logistical and command and control challenge to US personnel trying to help South Vietnam build an effective security force. Both the SDC and CG were poorly armed, poorly trained, and suffered from inferior leadership.[171] Since they were under the command and control of district (SDC) and provincial political chiefs (CG) who took guidance directly from the President, communication with regular military forces operating in their area was limited, resulting

[171] Moyar, 91.

in an inability to effectively coordinate joint offensive operations against guerillas.[172] The local knowledge and ties to the population possessed by these local and regional forces – critical to identifying the identity, locations, and patterns of guerilla forces in a particular area, was thus effectively cancelled out by this dysfunctional command and control relationship.

The U.S. stance towards command and control of the paramilitaries changed over time, creating a somewhat confused policy. Part of this was due to a failure to understand the challenge presented by a growing insurgency and part was due to an inability to understand and predict the impact of Diem's efforts to maintain personal control over the military.

At first the Embassy opposed efforts by Diem to integrate the CG with the military, and insisted on making them a police force.[173] Over time, this came to be a useful tool for President Diem to maintain control of outlying areas. When the U.S. later changed its policy and began pushing to create a more integrated security force structure to oppose the growing PLAF, they then ran into opposition from Diem. Eventually, however, continued pressure from advisory group leaders and visiting US senior military leaders caused Diem to move the CG and SDC underneath the joint command structure of the RVNAF. This resulted in some limited improvements. Diem relinquished official direct organizational control of the CG to the Ministry of Interior in 1958 and both the CG and SDC were moved under the Department of National Defense in December 1960

[172] Collins 10, Toczek 42.
[173] Moyar, 81.

(CG) and October 1961 (SDC). Although this provided some administrative improvements, both forces still remained under the day to day operational control of provincial chiefs who reported directly to President Diem. [174]

The inability to effectively coordinate between local paramilitary and military forces at the local level would remain a challenge to effective operations for South Vietnam for much of the next decade.

Patron Intervention: Promotions/Advancement

As stated in the previous section, loyalty to Diem was the number one factor impacting promotions during his administration. American officials did not intervene either directly to influence the selection of quality leaders or block the selection of ineffective leaders or indirectly to develop systems leading to the selection of leaders for merit over other factors during this period. Instead U.S. leaders and advisors simply attempted to work with the system that existed for their South Vietnamese clients.

Promotions and the selection and assignment of personnel for key leadership positions all came from the presidential palace. Promotions were both arbitrary and restrictive. Despite the need for competent leaders that was being demonstrated by a series of battlefield losses, all promotions continued to be based solely on perceived loyalty to Diem. Additionally, the extreme level of personal micromanagement of the system prevented the necessary pace or number of promotions and resulted in an RVNAF

[174] Toczek, 41.

that was chronically understaffed with officers and non-commissioned officers of the correct ranks and experience.[175]

As the regime sought to consolidate power, it created what Joint General Staff Chief General Vien later called a "monolithic political party" relying on "cronyism" for personnel selection based on personal loyalty and political affiliation.[176] Officers ridiculed the extreme concentration of authority that existed under Diem as "the three D system" referring to Dang (party – referring to membership in Diem's Can Lao political party), Dao (religion – the Roman Catholic Church of Diem) and Du (a crude reference to natives of central Vietnam, whose members were favored by Diem).[177] Vien observed that under the Diem regime "[c]ronyism eventually turned the most trusted but less competent officers of the regime into courtiers who fawned their way up the military hierarchy and created dissention among the RVNAF ranks."[178]

Rather than fixing the problem of cronyism, the 1963 revolution only changed the nature of influence. Following the 1963 coup a number of officers throughout all levels of the RVNAF received special promotions to the next rank or in some cases promotions of two ranks. The 1964 countercoup saw another group of officers connected to this new group of coup leaders promoted as well.[179] Rather than the "Three D's" officers joked that promotion was now gained through two other factors – "Su" and "Tuong". Su (Buddhist monk) referred to the strong influence of the Buddhist Institute for the

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[175] Toczek, 45.
[176] Vien, "Leadership," 313
[177] Khuyen, 15.
[178] Vien, "Leadership," 314.
[179] Khuyen, 23.

Propogation of the Dharma over the government and armed forces and Tuong (general) referred to the sponsorship of one of the generals in the national leadership council.[180]

Authority for promotions was not officially formalized until 1965, and will be covered in the next period.

Combat Force Commitment

As the Diem regime faced increasing challenges from their communist adversaries, the United States responded with an increasing level of military support. In 1960, there were five hundred uniformed American soldiers in South Vietnam responsible for overseeing training and the fielding of new equipment. By 1964, the U.S. commitment had expanded to over 23,000 uniformed military personnel who were now responsible for providing the South Vietnamese with advising, helicopter and fixed wing air transport, engineering, communications and intelligence support, and tactical air support.[181]

Up to 1959, MAAG leaders felt that the advisory effort was best kept at the headquarters effort and prohibited advisors from accompanying tactical units in the field. These directions did not solely stem from a force protection standpoint – MAAG chief GEN Williams felt that South Vietnamese tactical units should be left to develop on their own during combat operations.[182] However, as U.S. leaders became aware – and alarmed – of the extent to which RVNAF units were losing on the battlefield, the advisory mission

[180] Khuyen, 15.
[181] Clarke, 14.
[182] Toczek, 26-27.

became increasingly comprehensive and now became involved in tactical operations. U.S. Army advisors began operating at the ARVN regimental level in 1960, at the battalion level in 1961 and with territorial and regional forces in 1964. In 1965, each South Vietnamese Airborne, Ranger, and infantry battalion had a five-man U.S. advisory team providing enough manpower for some Americans to accompany some rifle companies during operations.[183]

Initially, U.S. tactical-level advisors – many of whom had no combat experience and who were paired with South Vietnamese who were combat veterans – found their RVAF counterparts complacent and resistant to their advice. However, as U.S. airlift and tactical air support resources became increasingly available as the 1960s advanced, this influence underwent a radical shift. The combat support that battalion level advisors provided became a critical asset relied on by South Vietnamese commanders and consequently their advisors gained a great deal of influence. When necessary, tactical level advisors were able to leverage this support to their advantage and push for changes that they felt were necessary.[184] Similarly, the provision of armored personnel carriers gave the ARVN an enhanced armored capability and South Vietnamese commanders were quick to realize that they needed American advice for the utilization of this new equipment.[185]

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[183] Clarke, 14.
[184] Cao Van Vien et al., "The U.S. Advisor," (1980) In *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals*, edited by Lewis Sorley, 667-710 (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2010), 687-688.
[185] Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," 113.

At higher levels, however, U.S. advisors generally focused much more on building a good rapport with their counterparts than leveraging U.S. assets and support to produce change. This extended to their collection of information on RVNAF unit shortfalls from their advisors in the field. Advisors were expected to be truthful but "up-beat" and to report the situation in the best possible light – reporting unsavory facts became known as "negativism."[186] This caused a significant avoidance of reporting negative trends – and in some cases deliberate falsifications - by junior and mid-level U.S. advisors whose subsequent promotions were dependent upon the same senior officers who generally emphasized the need for a more positive message.[187] This lack of consistent reporting regarding the depth of the problems within RVNAF units then resulted in a reduced demand signal to drive action by senior commanders, who often failed to use their comparatively greater influence to press for change. With a few exceptions that will be noted in later chapters, this bifurcated application of influence remained generally constant throughout the remainder of the conflict.[188]

Exemplar Battle: Ap Bac (January 2, 1963)

US Security Forces Committed: **Yes**
Primacy of US Combat Force Mission to: **Advising**
Advisors down to what level: **Individual maneuver element (company and battalion)**

[186] Toczek, 30.
[187] Specter, 244; Toczek, 29-30.
[188] Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," 6.

The often-cited battle of Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta region of southern South Vietnam in 1963 demonstrated the inherent weaknesses of the RVNAF at the time. One 7th division infantry battalion, two CG battalions, a mechanized infantry company and an airborne company heavily supported by US advisors and utilizing US helicopter aviation support executed a combined arms attack against two reinforced PLAF companies. Occurring during a period when South Vietnamese forces appeared to be making significant strides in in regaining territory lost to the PLAF, RVNAF inability to overcome a determined enemy highlighted lingering shortfalls below the surface despite the massive amount of resources being applied to develop RVNAF capacity.

The Situation:

In late December 1962, following a series of successful "counter-mopping up" operations against the South Vietnamese in the fall, Viet Cong elements in the Mekong River Delta prepared to stand and fight rather than fight and run.[189] A PLAF force consisting of two reinforced companies occupied and constructed defensive positions near the hamlets of Ap Bac and Ap Tan Thoi approximately 40 miles southwest of Saigon in South Vietnam's Dinh Tuong Province and only 10 miles from the 7th ARVN Division (responsible for securing the southern approaches to Saigon) basecamp at My Tho. [190] The two PLAF companies (1st Company 514th Provisional Battalion and 1st Company 261st Regional Battalion) of "main force" regulars were reinforced by local guerrillas for a total of approximately 340 fighters. With the PLAF having initially taken

[189] Toczek, 70.
[190] Moyar, 186. "Ap" is Vietnamese for hamlet. Bac and Tan Thoi hamlets thus became Ap Bac and Ap Tan Thoi in the post-battle reporting of US journalists.

heavy casualties from RVNAF operations in the early part of the year and now buoyed by more recent successes, historians surmise that these units had chosen to hold this territory out of a mix of rising confidence among their leadership combined with a need to improve morale in their rebuilt forces and show strength to the local population.[191]

The two neighboring hamlets that they occupied – Ap Tan Thoi to the north and Ap Bac to the south – provided a strong defensive position. They were surrounded by knee high water in dry season rice fields irrigated by numerous crisscrossing irrigation and transportation canals, both large and small. Further north lay swampland. Many of the canal sides were supported by thick dikes and lined with trees and thick scrub vegetation. The rice paddies would slow walking movement, while the heavy vegetation alongside the canals presented a major impediment to vehicular movement. By the evening of 1 January, the PLAF were dug into the sides of the dikes in well prepared positions and prepared to face RVNAF opposition supported by the new American helicopters. The use of helicopters and APCs was no longer a surprise for the PLAF, who had captured U.S manuals and trained tactics to counter them.[192]

The Plan (host nation and patron)

As the PLAF forces were setting up their defenses, the RVNAF Joint General Staff in Saigon was informed of enemy activity in Ap Tan Thoi and ordered the ARVN 7th Division headquarters in My Tho to retake the hamlet. On December 28th, an American signals intelligence aircraft detected a PLAF radio transmitter in Ap Tan Thoi

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[191] Toczek, 68; Moyar, 187.
[192] William P. Head, "The March to Oblivion: The Defeat at Ap Bac and the Americanization of the Vietnam War," *Journal of Third World Studies 31-2* (Fall 2014), 63.

and this information was relayed to the JGS, which then ordered the seizure of the hamlet.[193]

From the radio intercept and intelligence reports of fifty to sixty sampans (small boats) moving in the area, 7th ARVN Division commander Colonel (COL) Bui Dinh Dam assessed that a reinforced PLAF company of around 150 guerillas was operating in the area.[194] Dam accepted the suggestion of his American advisor, U.S. Army LTC John Paul Vann, that US advisors and the division staff jointly plan the operation (a practice that had been curtailed by the newly appointed LTC Dam's predecessor), and the combined US-ARVN planning team led by Captain (CPT) Richard Ziegler, the advisor for the division's planning and operations cell, set to work.[195]

Under CPT Ziegler's guidance, the US-ARVN team planned for Operation Duc Thang 1 ("Victory 1" in Vietnamese) – a combined arms attack by airmobile infantry, dismounted infantry, and a company of mechanized infantry mounted in M113 armored personnel carriers. The 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment (2/11 IN) – the only ground force unit directly participating in the attack drawn from the 7th Division – would be moved by helicopter to landing zones (LZs) north of Ap Tan Thoi and its three companies would then assault the hamlet from three directions. The remainder of the assaulting ground elements would come from forces underneath the command of the local Dinh Tuong province chief.[196]

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[193] Moyar, 187; Sheehan, 203.
[194] Toczek, 71.
[195] Sheehan, 203-204.
[196] Toczek, 72-73.

The Dinh Tuong Regiment (provisional) commanded by Major (MAJ) Lam Quang Tho (the province chief) would attack from the south and west. Four of the six companies of two CG battalions would attack abreast moving from south to north towards Ap Bac and then through to Ap Tan Thoi. The element with the heaviest firepower – the thirteen M113 APCs and associated mounted infantry company of the 4th Mechanized Rifle Squadron, 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment (4/2 ACR) commanded by Captain (CPT) Ly Tong Ba – would attack from the west.[197]

The one significant hitch in the planning for Operation Duc Thang 1 was a restriction from the JGS on helicopter lift assets and close support air assets available for the operation that emerged after the initial plan was developed. While the original plan called for preplanned air strikes and enough U.S. helicopters to move 2/11 IN in one lift, the JGS pulled these assets for another operation going on to the north. Instead of being able to move 2/11 IN at one time, the smaller helicopter company supporting the operation would require three lifts to get these units in place.[198]

However, the operation was not without fire support. While fixed wing aviation for preplanned, preparatory air strikes would not be available, five U.S. UH-1 "Huey" gunships were committed to provide aerial support. Additionally, the ground assault benefited from artillery support from six mortars and four 105mm howitzers from the 7th Division and four 155mm howitzers from the IV Corp's artillery. At least one American officer or non-commissioned officer (NCO) advisor would accompany each separate

[197] Toczek, 72.
[198] Toczek, 71.

maneuver element and facilitate the coordination of these air support as well as other combat advisory duties for their supported RVNAF elements.[199]

It was assumed that the PLAF would run from this attack and so an outer cordon was established with the 7th Division's ranger company blocking the Ba Beo Canal to the north and the two remaining CG companies blocking any escape to the west. These also constituted the operation's reserve. The eastern end of the three sided cordon created by this operations was left open and the ARVN commanders planned to use artillery and airpower to destroy any PLAF retreating across this relatively open route.[200] The attack force had 1200 troops devoted directly to the attack, with 3 additional companies in reserve, and significant mechanized and aviation assets.[201] This seemed like more than enough assets to accomplish the task of defeating the one anticipated PLAF reinforced company on the objective, but that is not what proceeded to occur beginning on the morning of January 2, 1963.

Command and Control

In theory, the overall RVNAF commander of the operation was the newly appointed 7th Division commander, COL Dam. Less than 2 weeks before, Dam had been a lieutenant colonel and the division's chief of staff.[202] On December 22d, however, President Diem split the previous III Corps area of operations and created a new IV Corps headquarters to command and control operations in the Mekong Delta. The 7th division's commander, COL Huynh Van Cao, was promoted to command the new

[199] Toczek, 73.
[200] Toczek, 72.
[201] Moyar, 187.
[202] Sheehan, 203.

corps.[203] Dam, in turn, was promoted to Colonel and replaced Cao, although Cao still remained his superior and could thus continue to influence his former unit.[204]

Although a competent administrator, more professional and less politically motivated (or connected) than many RVNAF officers, as well as much more amenable to working with American advisors than his predecessor, Dam was new to the job and unfamiliar with the stresses of battlefield command. His previous position had involved little of the planning and battlefield supervision which was immediately thrust upon him.[205] Contemporary battlefield reporters Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam also claim that their sources characterized Dam as "terrified of battle, helicopters, and [MG] Cao" and that he was an "unwilling successor…who doubted his ability to cope with the emotional burden of command."[206] Regardless of the veracity of these claims, having the more pliable officer rather than another, more political commander in charge of the high-visibility (guarding the approaches to Saigon) 7th Division appears to be the primary reason for Dam's selection by MG Cao – and approval by President Diem – rather than for other qualifications.[207]

In addition to a green and untested overall RVNAF commander, a major shortcoming inhibiting coordination for this operation was the difficult command relationship among the units responsible for the operation. The majority of the ground forces set to assault the two hamlets were not under COL Dam's command, but instead

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[203] Sheehan, 198.
[204] Sheehan, 203.
[205] Palmer, 1978, 41.
[206] Halberstam, 146; Sheehan, 203.
[207] Sheehan, 203; Toczek, 71.

fell under the control of the province chief, MAJ Tho. As described earlier, although they were in political positions responsible directly to the Ministry of Interior rather than the JGS, the province chiefs – personally selected by President Diem and largely military officers – also controlled the Civil Guard forces based in their provinces. In Dinh Tuong province, MAJ Tho – who came from a prominent Mekong Delta landowning family aligned with the President Diem's family -- controlled not only the two CG battalions in the province, but also the mechanized forces of the 4th Armored Cavalry Regiment (4 ACR) based at My Tho. MAJ Tho had been given command of 4th ACR as a potential counter-coup force should regular ARVN leaders attempt to seize nearby Saigon.[208]

Given this splintered command relationship, CPT Nguyen Van Su – the 7th Division's artillery commander and a graduate of the U.S. Army's artillery officer advanced course at Fort Sill – had informed COL Dam and his American advisor LTC Vann that the coordination of artillery support for the non-7th Division units (the CG and mechanized forces) would be impossible "should the situation become fluid" (ie should anything not go according to plan).[209] Dam had no direct authority over a large portion of the units involved in his operation – he could only request that Tho do particular actions – and little ability to support these other forces should the situation go awry. Despite this counterproductive relationship, the operation moved forward.

[208] Sheehan, 213.
[209] Palmer, 47.

Advisory Relationship

American advisors in this battle were present with each separate maneuver element and at the division command post. This meant that an advisory team was present with each of the battalion sized CG task forces, with 2/11 infantry and with the mechanized company and the reserve company. The advisors with 2/11 infantry split up so that they could accompany each company.

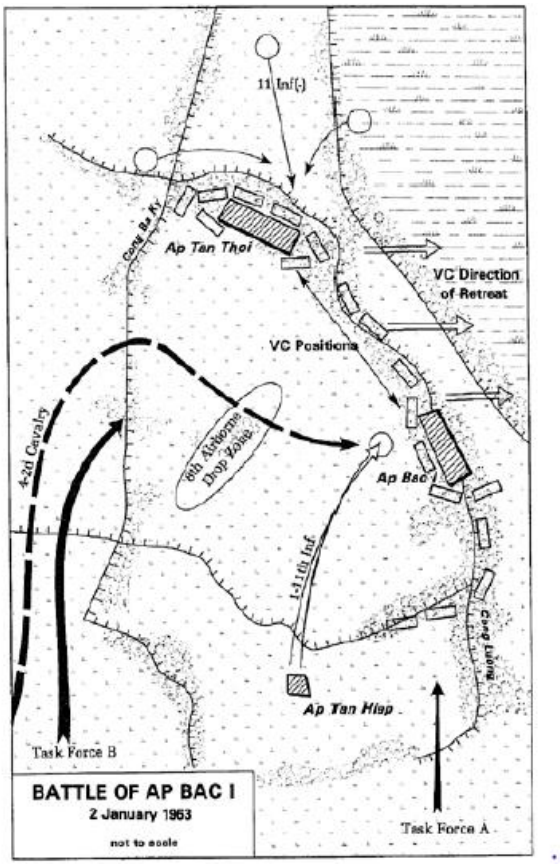

Figure 8: The Battle of Ap Bac[210]

[210] Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979) 26.

Conduct of the Operation

Problems Right from the Start

Challenges in synchronizing the movements of the various elements in the operation was a problem right from the start of the operation. At 6:35 am on Jan 2, 1963, the CG units began their advance from the south with two battalion-sized task forces abreast, each with their companies on line.[211] Although advancing to make contact with an as yet un-located enemy, the easternmost CG element, "Task Force A", initially moved out with no forward or flank security. The task force commander only fanned out local security elements when his US advisor, Lieutenant Bloch, intervened and pointed out the deficiency.[212]

On the western edge of the cordon, 4/2 ACR, the mechanized company, began its advance but ran into trouble after only fifteen minutes. Although their M113 armored personnel carriers had initially crossed a series of small irrigation canals easily, they soon ran into a larger canal, forcing them to dismount and slowly begin crossing their vehicles – a process taking almost an hour to complete.[213]

The airmobile operation to move the 7th Division's infantry battalion (2/11 IN) to its initial jump-off positions north of the two hamlets also ran into problems. As stated earlier, the withdrawal of aviation lift assets by the JGS had forced the South Vietnamese to deploy the three companies of the battalion one at a time. Dense fog that morning now created a new obstacle. Although the ten H21 helicopters carrying the 2d Company of

[211] Moyar, 187; Toczek, 76.
[212] Toczek, 76.
[213] Toczek, 76.

2/11 IN (2/2/11 IN) and their five Huey gunship escorts were able to take off and fly through the fog to get the first company to its landing zone north of Ap Tan Thoi by 7:00 am, the fog then thickened. The next company could not be moved until ninety minutes later when the sun had risen and burned off the fog at 9:30. The final company would move still later.[214]

If the originally planned allocation of aircraft had been present from the start, the entire battalion would have been in place to launch its operations at about the same time as the CG battalions to the south. With decreased air assets, however, the need for multiple lifts in poor weather significantly threw off the timing of the operation.[215]

Given the lack of forces available for the attack in the north, the 352d Ranger Company – originally tasked with conducting an amphibious landing to the north of 2/11 IN along the large Ba Beo Canal and blocking any enemy movement from the north – was now given the mission to support the lone 2/11 IN element (2d company) in its attack.[216] The 150 rangers successfully landed along the canal 1200 meters north of the 2/11 IN landing zone at 8:00 am. In the dense fog and unknown terrain, however, the rangers' movement to join up with the ARVN company just over a kilometer to their south was painfully slow. [217]

After moving only 500 meters in one hour, one of the rangers stepped on a mine and was killed. Concerned that they were trapped in a minefield, the ranger company halted and waited for visibility to improve. Even when the fog later cleared, the ranger

[214] Sheehan, 211.
[215] Sheehan, 78.
[216] Toczek, 76.
[217] Toczek, 76-77.

company still did not move further south to support 2/11 IN and remained stationary until given orders to re-board their transports and guard the 11th Infantry Regiment's command post at 4 pm.[218] The Ranger Company made no impact on the battle.

2d Company, 2/11 IN and its assigned advisor, CPT Kenneth Good, started its slow movement through the rice paddies towards Ap Tan Thoi 1500 meters to the south of its landing zone.[219] However, due to impact of weather upon follow-on airlifts and the dense terrain the three companies of 2/11 IN did not converge on assault positions north of Ap Tan Thoi until around several hours later at 11:00 am. As the battalion commander of 2/11 IN spread his companies on line facing south and running from west to east and prepared to begin his assault, much had happened in the intervening hours from when the multipronged attack had originally been planned to begin.[220]

The Civil Guard fight in the South

At approximately 7:45 am, the eastern CG element moving up from the south, Task Force A, came within a kilometer of Ap Bac.[221] Now moving more tactically then they had initially, the task force commander halted his force behind a dike and sent lead elements across an open rice paddy to conduct reconnaissance of a tree line 150 meters away. Unbeknown to the RVNAF attackers, Task Force A was approaching the southern PLAF defenses around Ap Bac and a PLAF platoon engaged the advancing CG forces at point blank range with heavy fire. As the small PLAF force pinned the much larger CG

[218] Toczek, 76-77.
[219] Toczek, 76.
[220] Toczek, 88-89.
[221] Toczek, 78; Sheehan, 212.

force behind the mud wall of the dike, the PLAF commander attempted to send a squad around the eastern flank of CG task force. The CG commander successfully counterattacked the flanking element with one of his companies, but was unable to dislodge the forces to his front. Two of his own efforts to flank the PLAF force to his front were equally unsuccessful.[222]

The US advisor, Lieutenant Bloch, had his radio damaged, cutting him off from his US chain of command. The lead CG company commander and his executive officer were killed and the task force commander was wounded. For the next two hours, the two companies of Task Force A remained pinned down by a PLAF force little more than 10% of their size and were unable to advance. They were unable to call in effective artillery fire on the tree line, with rounds landing far beyond in the hamlet of Ap Bac.[223]

To the west of Task Force A, Task Force B continued moving northward and encountered only light opposition. Unaware of the problems occurring to their east, they moved to assigned positions to the northwest of Task Force A and halted. In his command post to the south, their overall commander, provincial chief MAJ Tho, did not maneuver his 2d task force to aid Task Force A when LT Bloch used a Vietnamese radio to contact him and requested assistance.[224] Although flying in a spotter airplane overhead, US senior advisor LTC Vann was on a different radio frequency and remained unaware of the situation, since his subordinate advisor was unable to contact him. MAJ Tho did not inform COL Dam, the overall commander of the operation, that the southern

[222] Toczek, 78-79.
[223] Sheehan, 212.
[224] Sheehan, 213.

approach wing of the attack was pinned down and halted until 9:45 am, after two hours of fighting.[225]

The Air Assault Goes Awry

At this point, Tho requested that Dam commit the division reserve's infantry company (1/1/11 IN) to assist his forces using the H21 helicopters and their Huey Gunship escorts (now done ferrying 2/11 IN to its assault positions to the north) and COL Dam quickly complied. As the 102 ARVN soldiers and their US advisor boarded helicopters at 10 am and moved to their objective, LTC Vann flying overhead determined a landing zone to the west of Ap Bac.[226] With reinforcements coming his way, MAJ Tho finally informed Task Force B's commander CPT Thi of the dire situation facing Task Force A and ordered him to move to their assistance.[227]

Failure in US-Vietnamese and intra-American coordination now led to a colossal mistake. Although unable to observe defenders in Ap Bac, LTC Vann was suspicious. He and COL Dam argued by radio for a half hour on the correct location to land the reserves while Vann circled overhead in an observation plane. Eventually they came to agreement and Vann advised the US pilots flying in the ARVN reserve company to land three hundred meters west of the treeline on the edge of the hamlet.[228] Vann was right to be suspicious – much of Ap Bac's PLAF defenders were dug in along this treeline. Adding

[225] Toczek, 80.
[226] Moyar, 188.
[227] Toczek, 80.
[228] Palmer, 47.

to the problem, the US pilots ignored Vann's warning and landed less than 200 meters from the treeline – well inside effective range of the defenders' weapons.[229]

The PLAF opened fire as soon as the reserve company touched down. In the open, under heavy fire, and unable to move quickly in the swampy ground of the rice paddy, more than half of the reserve company was killed or wounded in the opening minutes of the engagement.[230] Although the supporting American Huey gunships strafed the defenders in Ap Bac, their fire was ineffective against the entrenched PLAF and four H21s and one Huey gunship were shot down.[231]

Rescuing the wounded Americans from the downed helicopters now became an American priority. LTC Vann and his advisors pressed COL Dam to commit the mechanized company and any other available forces to attack the landing zone on the western side of Ap Bac and rescue the wounded Americans.[232] Meanwhile, US Army Sergeant Arnold Bowers, the U.S. advisor at the crash site, rallied the survivors, took a radio from an immobile ARVN forward observer, and used this radio to call in accurate airstrikes on the defenders.[233] Repeated airstrikes and artillery fire called in by Vann and Bowers were unable to dislodge the PLAF or allow the pinned Americans and ARVN to escape, but did keep them alive.[234]

Despite repeated American requests, the South Vietnamese were hesitant to move towards the ambush site. COL Dam did not order 4/2 ACR to move to their aid until an

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[229] Head, 65.
[230] Moyar, 189.
[231] Toczek, 82; Head, 65.
[232] Moyar, 189.
[233] Head, 66.
[234] Moyar 190.

hour later. After receiving the order, the mechanized company – having finally crossed the canal that was previously causing them problems – advanced across the remaining 2 kilometers to Ap Bac slowly and extremely reluctantly despite repeated calls for speed over the radio from Vann and in person from their two American advisors, CPT James Scanlon, and CPT Robert Mays.[235]

Back in the 7th Division command post, chaos reined. As historian and Vietnam War veteran Lieutenant General (LTG) David Palmer observed "Captain Su, seeing his worst fears realized, struggled vainly to bring order to a fire support coordination center which would more aptly have been described as a fire support consternation center. [COL] Dam, the fine chief of staff who had not yet made the transition to commander, appeared lost in the hubbub. As the crisis mounted, he became subdued and withdrawn, hesitating to make decisions and failing to push subordinates."[236]

COL Dam's highly excited American advisor, LTC Vann was an aggressive and abrasive officer even in non-stressful times. Now, flying back and forth between the command post and the battlefield and furious about the Vietnamese delay, he likely only added to Dam's withdrawn state and the mechanized company commander (CPT Ba)'s delay as he openly berated Dam in front of his staff back in the command post and Ba over the radio.[237] However, at this stage of the battle Vann was the only command and control element maintaining the artillery fire and airstrikes keeping the pinned US and ARVN personnel alive.

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[235] Moyar, 189-190.
[236] Palmer, 48.
[237] Palmer, 48; Moyar, 193.

It was now midday. Although the reserve company and their downed helicopter crews were pinned down in the southwest, the RVNAF forces were soon to be in a position where they could threaten the PLAF defenders from three sides. Unfortunately, their inability to coordinate their attacks and maintain momentum would frustrate their assault.

The ARVN Attack Fails in the North

The ARVN infantry battalion, 2/11 IN, was finally in position by 11 a.m. and began its attack on the northern end of the PLAF defenses at Ap Tan Thoi, with its three companies on line from east to west and moving south. Having been aware of the large ARVN force approaching from the north for some time, the PLAF were oriented north and prepared for their attack. As 2/11 IN's center company approached the hamlet, a PLAF platoon opened fire from only twenty meters away, completely surprising the lead ARVN forces and pinning them down. Despite 3:1 odds, the ARVN commander had difficulty massing his forces and their superior firepower on his enemy due to the dense woodlines, canals and smaller rice paddies surrounding the hamlet. The attack from the north petered out and remained stalemated for the remainder of the day.[238]

To the south, MAJ Tho's two civil guard task forces had remained stationary since 10:30 am. Having extricated themselves from contact with the southern end of the PLAF defenses, they now awaited the attack of the mechanized company, 4-2 ACR, against the southwest corner of the PLAF defenses. As the M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) advanced slowly from the west, they passed the cooking fires of the Task

[238] Toczek, 89.

Force B civil guardsman. The CG forces had earlier been ordered by MAJ Tho to assume a static blocking position rather than support the pinned reserve company.[239] Now, rather than supporting the new mechanized attack, the CG forces ate their lunch.[240]

The Unsupported Mechanized Assault Fails

Having experienced dense terrain all morning, the M113s of 4-2 ACR now were able to advance more rapidly across the mostly dry rice paddies towards the trapped reserve company and arrived shortly before 2pm.[241] Based on their success in previous operations over the past year against PLAF forces untrained to face armored attacks, the mechanized company relied on the shock value of their individual APCs rather than attacking in mass. Thus, several pairs of M113s rushed the far treeline rather than waiting for the entire company to arrive and then attack in a line of 13 APCs.[242] On this occasion however, the PLAF chose to stand and defend their well-prepared positions rather than run and face near-certain defeat. Again the PLAF held their fire until close range and then engaged the exposed machine gunners on the M113s with great effect, causing high casualties.[243]

As they had been trained by the Americans, the M113 crews dropped their rear ramps and dismounted their attached infantry to suppress the PLAF.[244] However, the infantrymen were mentally unprepared for the hailstorm of fire that soon met them - on previous occasions when they had dismounted in combat, the PLAF had quickly

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[239] Toczek, 84.
[240] Toczek, 91.
[241] Moyar, 191.
[242] Toczek, 92.
[243] Toczek, 92.
[244] Moyar, 191.

collapsed. The infantry were unable to return fire and soon fell back to cover. An attempt by the unsupported vehicle crews to stand and engage the largely unseen PLAF in the treeline was unsuccessful. When the APC mounting a flamethrower was brought up to suppress the enemy, the weapon malfunctioned. An attempt by the company commander and two other APCs to storm the PLAF position and throw grenades at lone remaining PLAF machine gun failed as the storm of fire and hand grenades from the defenders forced them to retreat.[245]

Observing the failure of the piecemeal attacks by the mechanized company, LT Thi, the commander of TF B moved two of his CG companies on line to the southeast 4-2 ACR and prepared to attack the southern end of Ap Bac to relieve pressure on the mechanized forces. When he requested permission from MAJ Tho to attack, however, his request was denied. His request to attack was repeated – and denied – three additional times throughout the afternoon.[246] Eventually, unsupported and unable to break through the PLAF defenses, the mechanized company halted their attack and pulled back out of range.[247]

The Airborne Assault Does Not Prevent Retreat

During the mounted attack, IV Corps commander MG Cao and Brigadier General (BG) Tran Thien Kheim, the JGS chief of staff, had arrived at the 7th Division command post and Cao now assumed direction of the battle from Dam.[248] Cao restored order to the staff and ordered the US advisory team's newly arrived (he had originally been getting

[245] Moyar, 191-192.
[246] Toczek, 94-95; Sheehan, 26-261.
[247] Moyar, 192.
[248] Toczek, 95; Palmer 48.

ready to depart the 7th Division headquarters that day) forward air controller into the air in an observation plane where he could better control the placement of air strikes.[249] This allowed LTC Vann to focus on his advisory duties rather than being the primary air controller for the battle. The airstrikes also began to finally achieve heavy damage upon the PLAF defenders. [250] Whether the idea was Vann's suggestion, Cao's independent request or simply BG Thiem's initiative (historians provide conflicting assessments), the JGS now decided to commit the 8th Airborne Battalion (8th ABN) from its strategic reserve to airdrop in support of the attack.[251]

COL Dan Porter and LTC Vann pleaded with Cao to drop the 8th ABN to the east of the two hamlets, encircle the enemy and allow their eventual destruction.[252] Concerned with the potential for further casualties that might be involved in such an operation, however, Cao chose to drop the airborne battalion to the west of the hamlets to link up with the mechanized forces.[253] The airborne forces did not arrive until 6pm. When the American C-123 transports came under fire from the ground, the 300 paratroopers were dropped early – much closer to the PLAF defenders rather than safely behind the mechanized company to the west as Cao had originally planned. It remains unclear whether the error stemmed from the ARVN jumpmaster or the American pilot of the lead plane, but the error destroyed any hope of seizing the two hamlets that day.[254]

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[249] Toczek, 97.
[250] Sheehan, 260.
[251] Moyar 192; Palmer, 48, Toczek, 95.
[252] Sheen, 258.
[253] Palmer, 50; Moyar, 193.
[254] Moyar, 193; Sheehan, 261-262.

One airborne company landed to the southwest of Ap Tan Thoi and came under heavy fire from the PLAF defenders. Although they cheered and sounded bugles, the 2/11 IN forces to the north of the hamlet did not attack to support the airborne drop. Nor did the second airborne company which landed unmolested to the south out of range of the PLAF. Despite their reputation as a more elite fighting force, the airborne forces did not change the tide of battle for the RVNAF attackers. Those that survived quickly organized and small units of Airborne made several assaults against Ap Bac, although each was repelled. The Airborne battalion withdrew under fire to the west as darkness fell and were so scattered that they were unable to fully assemble until midmorning of the next day.[255]

As darkness fell, MG Cao refused an American request for a heavy artillery bombardment of the hamlets and for a C-47 flare plane to illuminate the PLAF's likely escape route to the east. He cited concern for the airborne forces still attempting to extricate themselves to the west.[256] The PLAF defenders broke contact later that night and were able to successfully escape to the east through the area that the RFNAF attackers had left uncovered. While the total number of dead and wounded on both sides were essentially similar and since the RFNAF gained the ground after the battle it was technically a draw. However, the ability of the PLAF to successfully engage a far superior combined arms of RVNAF attackers and down a number of US helicopters was a significant moral victory for the PLAF. The Battle of Ap Bac exposed serious

[255] Head, 70; Toczek, 99; Palmer, 50.
[256] Sheehan, 262.

weaknesses within the RVNAF and signaled the end of a short period of RVNAF dominance on the battlefield.[257]

Analysis

The battle of Ap Bac illustrated a number of RVNAF shortfalls stemming from the highly politicized system of the Diem regime, most especially in (dis)unity of command, poor training and general lack of aggressiveness, and the inability to effectively integrate combined arms operations. As Palmer later noted, "[t]he real difference [between the PLAF and RVNAF] lay in the realm of higher policies, particularly those emanating from the palace in Saigon, preventing unity of command and refusing to acknowledge that gains require blood."[258]

The defenders of Ap Tan Thoi and Ap Bac were not invincible. As journalist Neil Sheehan observed, they were not just mutually supporting, they were mutually dependent.[259] While the defenders benefited from occupying dug-in defenses in challenging terrain, if the South Vietnamese attackers had been able to execute the multi-pronged attack that was envisioned they likely would have overwhelmed the PLAF forces. Instead, however, the piecemeal South Vietnamese attacks over the course of the day allowed the PLAF to concentrate their forces and defeat each of these separate attacks by focusing on them one at a time.

The inability to coordinate the various RVNAF elements of the operation stemmed first from the barriers to unity of command created by the coup-proofing

[257] Palmer, 50.
[258] Palmer, 51.
[259] Sheehan, 239.

practices of the South Vietnamese government. While spreading the combat forces present in each province between multiple chains of command prevented South Vietnamese security forces from combining their forces against the central government, it also prevented effective battlefield coordination. COL Dam lacked the ability to directly control more than half of the forces in the operation and none of the various ARVN infantry, mechanized, Civil Guard, Airborne, or Ranger units in the operation were used to working together. The generally lethargic RVNAF movement and lack of synchronization ultimately falls on the shoulders of Dam, the overall battlefield commander.

Serving alongside, rather than subordinate to COL Dam, MAJ Tho – the political/administrative chief for the district chosen for loyalty to Diem rather than competence – was now commanding forces on the battlefield and displayed even greater shortfalls in performing necessary coordination. MAJ Tho appeared uninterested in establishing a close relationship with his ARVN counterpart who was technically in charge of the operation or to ensure that his subordinate task force attacks were timed to coincide with and support the 7th Division infantry to the north. The fact that Tho was the nominal superior for CPT Ba and his mechanized company likely contributed to the delay in these critical armored assets arriving on the battlefield to support COL Dam's operation.

The inability to support neighboring forces was not just between Civil Guard and ARVN forces, the two CG battalions also failed to support each other. Supporting adjacent forces is a standard infantry task and although this ultimately falls on the

shoulders of the higher commanders, this demonstrates significant shortfalls in the ability of these two subordinate battalion commanders to control their forces. The entire force was not ready for battle and was unable to perform basic infantry tasks against numerically smaller PLAF force which actually counterattacked successfully against the much larger CG attackers.

Ultimately, RVNAF performance in the battle was due to a failure of leadership. Some of this is likely due to lack of training in how to effectively control the forces under their command. However, the larger problem appears to stem from a system that chose senior leaders for command positions based on political reliability rather than merit and ability and which failed to place appropriate incentives so that those in command would perceive that effective performance would result in their advancement

COL Dam was unable to integrate the actions of the various elements under his command into one integrated attack with each element supporting the others– a critical requirement for any Division commander. As discussed earlier, MG Cao selected COL Dam as his successor because Dam was malleable and would follow his orders – not because he had demonstrated the appropriate attributes to be an effective commander. President Diem, in turn, approved this selection because he didn't want an aggressive officer controlling one of the key approaches to Saigon. MAJ Tho was selected for the critical job as province chief – a position in the South Vietnamese hierarchy of the time requiring both administrative acumen as well as military ability due to its dual roles – due to his family connections, not any demonstrated ability. The failure of both of these

primary commanders to adapt to a fluid battlefield had a tremendously disruptive impact on the battle.

MG Cao and CPT Ba provide an interesting conundrum, demonstrating the failure of the system to provide incentives for effective (meritorious performance) over other concerns. Both were commanders previously lauded by their U.S. advisors for their aggressive attitudes, but on this day with its highly visible operations, both were acutely aware of President Diem's prioritization on minimizing casualties well over any other factors such as battlefield success. Palmer highlights that while American commanders in the war would also be driven by a focus on minimizing casualties, they also prioritized victory.[260] Victory had no similar priority for the RVNAF commanders of this period – it made an officer stand out as a potential threat to President Diem.

A year earlier, MG Cao had been an aggressive commander of the 7th Division. The battle would show that he was a qualified commander – when he chose to be. Cao had learned that being too effective or too aggressive of a commander was seen as a threat by President Diem, not a positive quality. That is why he and his division advisor LTC Vann had previously clashed – when Cao backed off the tempo of his previously aggressive operations. At the end of the day, having suffered serious losses and unwilling to suffer still more in a protracted engagement, MG Cao, to whom Palmer attributes the quote "[i]t is not prudent to corner the rat," essentially allowed the PLAF to successfully withdraw under the cover of darkness by not pressing the fight.[261]

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[260] Palmer, 49.
[261] Palmer, 50.

Similarly, CPT Ba previously shown himself to be an effective commander and with the heavy firepower of his mechanized company might have changed the outcome. In earlier smaller actions, Ba had been praised by his American advisors as a highly competent and aggressive manner and thus his extreme hesitancy on this critical day was a shock for them. But Ba was also a Buddhist – a major strike against him for promotion chances in Diem's regime which heavily prioritized Catholic officers. It is possible that on this day – the largest and most complex battle that he had ever participated in – Ba was concerned that being aggressive and incurring casualties would have ended any potential for future promotion.

The battle showed the failure of the majority of RVNAF commanders at all levels to effectively utilize artillery and air support. ARVN artillery consistently fell wide of its targets due to an inability by the South Vietnamese to control their fires.[262] The occasional effectiveness of the air support came from the direct intervention of LTC Vann flying overhead, not from his RVNAF contemporaries until MG Cao arrived at the division command post and demonstrated an understanding of how to effectively use aviation support.

The battle also demonstrated the inability of all units to effectively maneuver under fire. When its center company became pinned down, the rest of 2/11 IN failed to move rather than use its other companies to attack Ap Tan Thoi from the east and west. Similarly MAJ Tho in the south was unable or unwilling to use his other Task Force attack from the flank to relieve the pressure on his other task force that was engaging the

[262] Toczek, 84.

the PLAF defenders. The Mechanized company could maneuver individually and in teams, but was unable to achieve an assault with the entire company and utilize the mass of its multiple vehicles and their heavy firepower to overwhelm the defenders of Ap Bac available to him. The Ranger company appeared unable to move in the dense vegetation and contributed nothing to the overall battle. This sort of movement under fire is the standard expected by any infantry or mechanized formation. The inability of the RVNAF to execute these maneuvers demonstrates significant training shortfalls in addition to the poor leadership discussed earlier.

Given the inability to perform either their individual basic tasks or effectively coordinate combined arms operations, we can rate all of the RVNAF units at Ap Bac as "Lacking Basic Proficiency."

This battle also provides a clear view of the degree to which capability substitution by the U.S. was covering up shortfalls in the RVNAF. Capability substitution involves the provision of patron security force capabilities for client capabilities. This substitution results in apparently higher levels of security force effectiveness for the overall battle – but these represent the effectiveness of the patron masking shortfalls in the effectiveness of their partnered client forces.

In recalling the battle, the U.S. corps advisor – retired US Army COL Daniel Porter later observed that integration of multiple elements was a great step forward for the RVNAF, even if they didn't end up integrating very well, since they hadn't generally done this before. But doesn't appear to have been an RVNAF idea. According to Porter, Captain Ziegler and other U.S. advisors were the driving force in the 7th Division's

planning effort. [263] This is an example of capability substitution, but a positive one in this case. The U.S. were trying to drive coordination. The problem, however, were the larger barriers impeding coordination between different RVNAF elements. Additionally, by U.S. advisors driving the planning effort rather than assisting with it, they were substituting their own capability to develop the plan rather than building an RVNAF planning capability of their own.

Assessment – Period I: U.S. Advising

During the period from 1955 to 1964, despite the expenditure of increasingly greater resources that evolved into the largest ongoing foreign policy initiative of its time, U.S. assistance to the RVNAF was unable to create a security force able to defeat its expanding opponents in the field. Unfortunately, although large and consuming an extensive amount of U.S money and manpower, the RVNAF emerging as the product of a long running assistance effort were clearly a 'paper tiger' – repeatedly bested by opponents who, contemporary observers opined, – should have been imminently 'defeatable.' This case demonstrates the classic puzzle of this study – how could the commitment of immense resources and the support of one of the most powerful and professional militaries in the world – with an increasingly large footprint – result in such consistently poor outcomes on the battlefield?

The events in this chapter shows the importance of viewing these cases from a dyadic standpoint, where one security force need only be better than its opponent. In

[263] Daniel B. Porter, Interview by Ted Gittinger (March 29, 1982), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports /images. php?img=/images/2397/23970411001.pdf, 15.

1955, Diem's fledgling forces were able to rapidly defeat a number of armed groups with large numbers of standing forces in succession and allow the president to consolidate power. Although the bulk of Diem's forces were poorly trained and organized, he possessed a core group of Airborne forces that were more effective than their peers or opponents due to years of combined operations with the French. This was enough to provide the edge for the National Army in a series of operations that were primarily shows of force with short firefights leading to negotiations rather than large scale combat operations.

However, beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the RVNAF faced new and more effective opponents – first the PLAF and eventually the PAVN. U.S. advisors introduced new techniques and new capabilities which provided the edge for short periods of time following their arrival in South Vietnam. Unfortunately, after each period of success, the RVNAF's communist adversaries were time and again able to adapt much more quickly than South Vietnamese government forces and introduce countermeasures that soon allowed them to regain prominence on the battlefield.

The case of South Vietnam under the Diem regime clearly shows the destabilizing impact of politicization upon security force effectiveness, occurring through the intermediate vehicle of organizational practices. The previous sections of this chapter have shown in detail how weaknesses in RVNAF leadership, command and control, and training, led to resulting ineffectiveness on the battlefield. This is the argument of those suggesting that politicization of security forces is the primary variable at play in these situations. But was the Diem regime the only significant player in this situation?

The model introduced in Chapter 2 suggested that the patron states involved in security force assistance *could* – depending on their actions - counter the politicizing impact of a weak state with targeted efforts to reform particular organizational practices. South Vietnam was clearly a weak state during this period, as shown by the turbulent societies and challenges of the Diem regime to establish its authority throughout the country. What about the activity of the U.S. in regards to host nation intervention in these organizational practices?

During this period the U.S. did not intervene in attempt to impact RVNAF promotion practices. The U.S. *did*, however, involve itself in traning and command and control.

In terms of command and control, U.S. involvement initially had a *negative* rather than positive impact. By establishing corps headquarters as part of the expanding RVNAF structure on top of the pre-existing Military Region headquarters, the U.S. actually increased the level of dysfunction. The already confused and overlapping chain of command in counterinsurgency operations was further complicated by an additional redundant headquarters in each region. The MAAG later helped the RVNAF restructure and integrate the corps and military regional headquarters as corps tactical zones, essentially returning to the status quo. No other major initiatives in the command and control arena were pushed during this period. Essentially, by the end of the period we can assess the U.S. intervention in this variable as a net zero – the damage initially done was later erased.

The U.S. also participated extensively in developing an initial entry training capability for the RVNAF. However, as was described earlier, the level of training provided was limited and did not emphasize either hands on training or a realistic tactical environment for trainees. The MAAG was also aware of the RVNAF prioritization of form over substance in its basic training structure and made little attempt to correct these inadequacies. Most new enlistees thus arrived at their first units unprepared to complete their required combat tasks.

Some have subsequently argued that the RVNAF were trained for the wrong fight and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency argued the same thing in 1958. However, MAAG Chief LTG Williams' reply at the time seems to hold value. Williams argued that the U.S. development effort was focused on developing ARVN units able to meet the requirement of *both* conventional and counter-insurgency missions. He argued that only when tactical units had mastered their basic individual and small unit tasks would more complex counter-insurgency training be useful. If small units could not effectively perform the basics of fire and maneuver in general, then they could not be expected to perform these tasks in jungle or swamp terrain where visibility and movement were impaired and operations were much more complex.[264] Unfortunately, Williams and his successors were unable to get the RVNAF to deal with these basics, let alone the more complicated tasks, and RVNAF effectiveness never significantly improved.

[264] Spector, 352.

By not initially recognizing the value of the CG and SDC (renamed as the RF and PF later in this period) and devoting appropriate resources to train these important forces, the U.S. advisory command missed a critical opportunity. For more than half of this period the MAAG ignored these forces and focused solely on the conventional elements of the RVNAF. As the PLAF emerged as a growing threat, the territorial forces were still a very secondary effort, giving the insurgency a huge advantage in the struggle for control of rural populations that plagued the Diem regime from late 1950s onward. As will be seen in later chapters, advisors and training efforts focused increasingly on training territorial forces in later periods. Not focusing efforts on territorial forces left the RVNAF element primarily responsible for counterinsurgency operations overwhelmingly unprepared for the threat that emerged.

Some developments like the Rangers would eventually (as we shall see in following chapters) become highly capable organizations. However, the formation and prioritization of elite units such as Rangers and paratroopers created a situation where only certain units really received better training rather than building a more overall focus on training throughout the RVNAF. The ineffective performance of the Rangers at the battle of Ap Bac also shows that even these training efforts took a while to bear fruit.

A final dynamic that becomes evident in this chapter is the case of "capability substitution." As the danger of the PLAF increased, the U.S. responded by deploying a number of its own assets to assist in combat operations against the enemy. This had two impacts. First, the U.S. assigned the complicated task of calling in air support – strike aircraft and attack, transport and medical evacuation helicopters – to its advisors. This

produced the near term result of giving tactical advisors much greater influence over their South Vietnamese peers by making the advisor the lynchpin to receive these assets. This resulted in a long term negative impact – the American advisors didn't directly train their Vietnamese counterparts on how to use these assets and the assets were controlled on U.S. rather than Vietnamese networks. Thus the RVNAF did not develop the systems to control these assets on their own. Additionally, little effort was made to develop these capabilities within the small and fledgling Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF).

Thus the Americans were able to produce rapid improvements in overall improvement on the battlefield. But although they were done in support of the RVNAF, these weren't really improvements in *RVNAF effectiveness*. Instead, American effectiveness was substituted to achieve battlefield outcomes. This achieved the ability to rapidly field rapid mobility and precision fire capabilities that were beyond the RVNAF. However, this also made the RVNAF reliant on the U.S. for these assets rather than developing the sort of independent capabilities that would have allowed them to do this on their own in the future. This American focus on the rapid rather than long term solutions would have serious long term implications for the RNVAF.

Evidence of other potential variables?

What about the potential role of other common hypotheses for variability in security force effectiveness?

At first glance, this chapter seems to provide support for Stephen Biddle's assertion of 'small footprint, small payoff.' The small U.S. assistance footprint during the middle and late 1950s does not appear to have significantly changed the organizational

practices of the RVNAF. However, as the U.S. footprint in South Vietnam began to expand significantly, their partnered South Vietnamese were unable to match the pace of improvements in their PLAF adversaries. An expanding footprint did not seem to create a greater payoff.

The arguments of the relative value of democracy in improving certain organizational practices may be useful, but as this case occurred in a case of an authoritarian government in conflict with authoritarian communist opponents, there is a lack of variation to establish sufficient relationships. In the later years, South Vietnam did gradually become more democratic, so this potential variable will be examined further in subsequent chapters.

The warrior culture argument does not seem particularly useful in this case. Diem's forces first found themselves in conflict against other South Vietnamese during his consolidation of power, where they were comparatively more effective in the dyadic relationship. However, after this same force was increased in size and capabilities, throughout much of the late 1950s and 1960s the RVNAF found themselves frequently defeated on the battlefield by the PLAF. The PLAF, at least initially, were almost exclusively composed of southerners trained in the north and then infiltrated back down into South Vietnam. So why was one force so much more effective than another? At least some of the outcomes of the warrior culture model – particularly the lack of initiative do seem to be present in the RVNAF. However, the PLAF opposition in the battle of Ap Bac demonstrated a great deal of initiative and they came from the same base

culture as their RVNAF opponents. Any kind of warrior culture argument or educational culture argument would not seem to apply here.

Lack of understanding by U.S. advisors of South Vietnamese culture and language is frequently mentioned as a barrier. But it is frequently mentioned as just one of a number of barriers which also included a lack of training for American advisors in how to perform their roles, the fact that American advisors had a level of understanding of the integration of combined arms elements that was far beyond that of their partners, and many other factors.[265] So clearly the earlier arguments for barriers between 1st world and 3rd world culture might have been at play. But just as powerful is the simple difference between two different cultures, which certainly is universally recognized as a common barrier to understanding, but is not one of the common factors leading to comparative weaknesses in security force effectiveness.

One cultural factor that *was* commonly mentioned by RVNAF officers who had served in the preexisting National Army, was the influence of the competing organizational cultures of the French military and their American successors. The French military was characterized by a very distant relationship between officers and their enlisted soldiers and noncommissioned officers, whereas the American military emphasized a much larger role for noncommissioned officers. Even within the officer ranks, French military culture at that time emphasized not only deference to higher ranks and a "do as I say, not as I do" culture, but also a lack of initiative by junior officers expected to carry out rather than interpret orders and an overall centralization of

[265] Spector, 346.

authority.[266] When combined with the class differences within the RVNAF, this led to a focus on gaining the privilege of higher rank as a status symbol and to separate higher officers from the dangers and harsh environment of field duty versus more comfortable and privilege of higher rank.[267]

The impact of different patron organizational cultures upon their client *does* seem to have at least a degree of explanatory value and is worth further examination. This is not a concept that has been widely developed in security studies literature, although it does bear further examination. We will examine this subject further in the next chapter – where U.S. influence and culture became much more extensive throughout the RVNAF.

As Spector notes in his analysis of the early years of the U.S. advisory mission,

> "[few] South Vietnamese officers shared, or even understood the American officers' believe in coordination, teamwork, loyalty to superiors, and subordinates, skill and delegation of authority. Yet these ideas were fundamental to the U.S. style of military operations. Nor did the Vietnamese officers see their government or the army as an entity; they view each in terms of their own particular bureau, agency, or battalion, independent of, and usually in competition with, other agencies and units."[268]

These are all different aspects of organizational culture. But they don't appear to have been aspects of a uniquely Vietnamese culture. Instead they seem to be byproducts of structural factors, in particular from organizational practices.

As has been described throughout this chapter, the role of politicization was clearly a major factor in explaining weaknesses in South Vietnamese security force effectiveness from 1955 to 1964. The coup-proofing strategies pursued by the Diem

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[266] Toczek, 46-47.
[267] Toczek, 47-48.
[268] Spector, 345.

administration clearly had a major deleterious impact upon its security forces. But an argument based solely on this single variable and completely ignoring the role of South Vietnam's US patron seems to miss a significant part of the picture. As described above, in some ways US intervention actually *increased* the dysfunctionality of the RVNAF, by adding in corps headquarters that largely duplicated the role of the existing military region headquarters, and further complicating a command and control system that was already being manipulated by the president. Given the increasing degree of American influence (regardless of how and where this influence was applied) thoughout this period, an explanation that doesn't take this influence into account seems to lack significant explanatory value.

CHAPTER FOUR: SOUTH VIETNAM PERIOD II -- US INTERVENTION (1965-1968)

Variable Analysis:

US Combat Forces Committed: **Yes**
Primacy of US Military Force Mission to: **Independent Operations**
Advisors down to what level: **BN + company level advisors for battalions conducting independent pacification operations**
Successful Organizational Intervention in Training: **Yes**
Successful Organizational Intervention in Command and Control: **Limited**
Successful Organizational Intervention in Promotions: **Limited/systemic only**
Exemplar Battle: *Battle of Hue during the Tet Offensive* (1968)

With South Vietnam in dire conditions, and under the pretext of a naval clash between a US destroyer and North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Tonkin Gulf in 1964, the US intervened and committed ground forces to the defense of South Vietnam. Aimed at first clearing enemy presence from South Vietnam and subsequently preventing the re-infiltration of communist forces from North Vietnam or along South Vietnam's long western border with Laos and Cambodia, this commitment steadily increased until it reached a high point of 536,000 US forces by 1968.[269] *US priority on the expansion of deployed combat forces resulted in the decrease of advisors for South Vietnamese units. When GVN leaders refused a US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) request for an integrated US-GVN command structure along the lines of that in the Korean war a*

[269] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 5.

decade previously, RVNAF were primarily relegated to the rear area defense of urban and coastal areas.[270] *US forces assumed primacy for the mission of eliminating PAVN and PLAF main force units while the RVNAF assumed responsibility for "pacification" – securing the population.*

Overview

With the RVNAF's senior leadership in turmoil and focused on the continuing series of power struggles in the capital of Saigon, North Vietnam committed more VC forces as well as regular NVA divisions to South Vietnam in December 1964. North Vietnamese Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap planned this to be the final phase of the war. In its opening phases, a division-sized force of PLAF defeated three South Vietnamese Ranger battalions and a Marine Battalion and inflicted heavy casualties on reinforcing armor and mechanized forces, at Binh Gia forty miles southeast of Saigon.[271]

In Binh Gia as well as two other consecutive battles in 1965 – Song Be and Dong Xoai – emboldened Viet Cong main force units seized the offensive, attacking and defeating RVNAF in urban areas. In each of these attacks, RVNAF infantry supported by supposedly elite forces – Rangers, Marines and Airborne forces respectively for the three battles – demonstrated an inability to effectively use their organic firepower and make use of the defensive advantage of defending in urban areas. As with Ap Bac, separate

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[270] Clarke, 85-96.

[271] J.F. Loye Jr, G.K St. Clair, L.J. Johnson, J.W. Dennison, *Lam Son 719 30 January – 24 March 1971*, Headquarters, Pacific Air Force, Directorate of Operations Analysis, Project CHECO Reports (March 24, 1971), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/ repositories/2/digital_objects/550684, xiii; Moyar 337; Jack Shulimson, and Charles Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965*, (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1978), 5.

components demonstrated an inability to coordinate their actions and support each other.[272]

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Bundy assessed that South Vietnam was in danger of collapse and (correctly) that North Vietnam was about to begin a general offensive. In a grave strategic error, however, the North chose this as the time to send a message by directly attacking American forces and gave President Johnson the excuse that he needed to intervene. On February 7th, a PLAF mortar attack on the American airbase and barracks at Pleiku killed 9 Americans destroyed numerous aircraft and helicopters. This was a dramatic departure from their previous activities.[273]

With the situation degrading and with Bundy, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, and GEN Westmoreland all recommending that the South would collapse without the commitment of U.S. troops, President Johnson made the decision to deploy American ground forces to Vietnam.[274] A force of U.S. marines arrived in Da Nang in March 1965, the beginning of what would soon become a massive commitment of U.S. forces over the next three years and ultimately reach a peak strength of more than 543,000 U.S. military members in May 1969.[275]

By June of 1965, the communist summer offensive was in full force, with GEN Westmoreland reporting to Washington that the PLAF were capable of mounting regimental sized operations in all four of the South Vietnamese Corps Tactical Zones.

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[272] Brigham, 89.
[273] John M. Carland. *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide May 1965 to October 1966*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 2000), 13-14.
[274] Carland, 14; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 233.
[275] Collins, 48.

At the end of the month, five ARVN regiments and nine separate battalions – more than two divisions worth of combat power – were assessed as combat ineffective due to combat losses and desertions.[276] With the RVNAF overwhelmed and unable to meet the expanding threat, Westmoreland was given authority to launch U.S. offensive operations. On June 27, 1965, a new U.S. "search and destroy" strategy went into effect when elements of the American 173d Airborne Brigade, an Australian Army battalion and ARVN forces launched a search and destroy operation north of Saigon.[277]

The American buildup was rapid and involved the commitment of its foremost ground units. Two full divisions were in place by April and the equivalent of four Army and Marine divisions by the end of 1965.[278] These forces deployed to border areas as a shield to prevent the North Vietnamese incursion. After an initial build-up, the U.S. Army's elite 1st Cavalry Division was in combat with the PAVN by November along II Corps' western border with Cambodia. Along with the Americans came Allied contingents – a full South Korean division and a small Australian and New Zealand force were assigned sectors and Thailand and the Philippines contributed contingents – for a total of almost 184,000 Allied military personnel and steadily growing.[279]

With the massive commitment of U.S. and allied military forces providing a breathing space for the RVNAF to rebuild itself, South Vietnam's tangled civil-military space underwent a further series of infighting, followed by increasing consolidation of power and government stability. By June 1965, with the government of Prime Minister

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[276] Moyar, 405
[277] Ky, 79.
[278] Clarke, 109.
[279] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 6-7; Clarke, 109.

Quat clearly ineffective, infighting between Quat and head of state Suu, and the RVNAF strategic reserve approaching complete exhaustion on the battlefield, a council of fifty RVNAF generals restored direct military rule.[280] General Nguyen Van Theiu assumed leadership of a ten man committee of military leaders known as the Committee for the Direction of the State, or more frequently as "the Directory," while Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, the head of the Air Force became Prime minister and formed a government.[281] American leaders in Saigon had long been courting Thieu, whom they saw as a talented military and political leader.[282]

Unlike their predecessors, the new leadership team proved much more adept – they quickly began to fix problems in South Vietnam's civil administration, rebuffed the political interference of Buddhist leaders, and focused their efforts on defeating the communists.[283] The Directory acted as a standing committee responsive to an Armed Forces Congress of lesser generals. At first, Thieu and Key shared power relatively equally, with Thieu serving as head of state, with the authority to promote corps commanders, and serving as the bridge between the officers in the field and the executive. Ky supervised the central administration and retained control of the air force. Other powerful Directory members – each with their own followings and interests – were the four Corps Tactical Zone commanders with authority to appoint all deputy division and subsector (district) in their virtual fiefdoms. In Saigon, but with little day to day control over the subordinate corps, Defense Minister Nguyen Huu Co ran the

[280] Moyar, 402.
[281] Clarke, 22-23.
[282] Moyar, 403.
[283] Moyar, 402-403.

administrative functions of the ministry, appointed corps chiefs of staff, and gained great positional power from his close relationship with the MACV Commander, GEN Westmoreland.[284] All of these leaders generally dealt with Thieu and Ky as equals and fellow generals rather than as subordinates.[285]

Over the next year, the Thieu and Ky began to gradually centralize power, gradually moving South Vietnam towards the formation of a more permanent government structure in the form of a constitutional democracy. As their positions became more secure, their own personal competition began to increase.

Thieu and Ky's efforts to consolidate power received a major challenge in early 1966, when a loose coalition of Buddhist groups known as the Struggle Movement launched a series of antigovernment demonstrations across northern South Vietnam.[286] Politically active Buddhists had first clashed with Diem, but then gained extensive influence over South Vietnamese politics – including leaders throughout the RVNAF – in the turbulent period from 1964-1965. These leaders were strong supporters of LTG Nguyen Chanh Thi – the originator of the 1960 failed coup against Diem and now the politically powerful commander of I Corps who critics suggested ruled the northern provinces "like a virtual fiefdom."[287]

When the prime minister tried to replace Thi with 1st Division commander MG Chanh in March, the northern cities of Hue and Danang erupted into protests and general

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[284] Clarke, 24-25.
[285] Clarke, 25.
[286] Clarke, 128.
[287] Andrew Wiest, 2008, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*, New York: New York University Press, 58.

strikes, with a large antigovernment and anti-American component and calls for peace. American forces in the region – who saw Thi as one of the better ARVN commanders – were paralyzed as they stood down and watched as the crisis moved towards a military confrontation. When Ky arrived at Danang airbase on 5 April with National Police, three Marine and two Ranger battalions, the new 1st Division commander, MG Chanh, declared for the Struggle Movement and sent his troops to confront Ky. The Prime Minister avoided a conflict and withdrew after appointing a third I Corps commander, LTG Dinh.[288] The country appeared to be again descending into chaos as the II Corps commander to the south declared his neutrality in this matter.[289]

A month later in May, the government acted decisively to restore order. On May 15th, two Marine and two Airborne battalions backed by tanks and aircraft seized I Corps headquarters in Danang in a bloodless show of strength, placing yet another officer, LTG Cao in charge. The new I Corps commander was unable to convince 1st Division dissidents in Hue to surrender however, and retreated from the city under fire. The crisis was finally ended on June 18 when 1st Division commander MG Nhuan chose not to oppose the five Airborne battalions entering Hue City in a show of force under the command of the Airborne Division's Deputy commander, COL Ngo Quang Truong. Truong was installed as the new 1st Division Commander and 2d Division commander MG Hoang Xuan Lam was promoted to become the sixth I Corps commander in three months.[290]

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[288] Wiest, 59-60.
[289] Clarke, 135.
[290] Wiest, 60-62; Clark, 138-140.

The Buddhist crisis was the last major threat to government stability. Even as the government was addressing this threat, measures were being made to transition to civilian government. In mid-April 1966, a committee of 10 military and ten civilian members was appointed to create legislation for electing a constituent assembly. The new civilian assembly was elected on September 11, 1966 and created the new constitution of 'the Second Republic' in April 1967. During general elections in September 1967, Theiu was elected as President and Ky as Vice President and the political situation finally began to stabilize.[291]

Over time Thieu slowly consolidated power and marginalized the influence of the rival with whom he shared a large degree of practical power due to Ky's own network of supporters. Although he was careful to maintain stability, Thieu gradually centralized power by replacing supporters of Ky and his other rivals with his own throughout all levels of the security chain of command including division commanders, provincial and district chiefs. The American domination of the war effort during this middle period of the war allowed Thieu's focus on the political sector and personal loyalty.[292]

With the approach of 1966, the U.S. now had enough forces on the ground to begin planning for major offensive operations and what had originally been envisaged as a joint U.S. and RVNAF campaign to retake South Vietnam soon became a largely American-led campaign. Since 1965, Westmoreland had envisaged a three-pronged campaign to secure South Vietnam – 1) "to stem the tide", 2) "to destroy [the PLAF] and

[291] Khuyen, 8.
[292] Clarke, 258-269.

pacify selected high priority areas" and 3) restore "the entire country to the control of [South Vietnam]".[293] Westmoreland and the JGS Chief, GEN Co, had originally planned for U.S. and RVNAF regular forces to target PAVN and PLAF main force units while the territorials dealt with PLAF guerillas. As late as October 1965, MACV chief of staff MG Rossen declared that the "primary mission" of MACV was "to assist and support the RVNAF" through "cooperation and coordination of commanders at all echelons". [294]

However, a combination of political pressure from both U.S. and South Vietnamese sources instead led to a bifurcation of security responsibilities. In Washington, Secretary of Defense McNamara and Secretary of State Rusk expressed concern with the participation of U.S. combat units in territorial security and population control – a mission known as 'pacification'. In Saigon, GEN Thieu preferred to let American forces bear the brunt of major combat operations while his forces rebuilt themselves.[295]

As a new strategy to commit the bulk of RVNAF forces to the pacification mission and U.S. forces began to coalesce, former Ambassador Taylor, recently returned to the U.S. and now a special military advisor to President Johnson, argued strongly against it. At the end of November 1965, Taylor argued that having the U.S. in the role of "primary doer" would have extremely negative impacts on the RVNAF, whose units would end up primarily assuming static defensive roles. Such roles cause them to "fall behind our own units" and suffer the deterioration of "military performance" and

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[293] Clarke, 106.
[294] Clarke, 107.
[295] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 250.

"command and control procedures governing the employment of troops."[296] Instead, Taylor suggested U.S. planners should increase the role of major combat responsibilities for the RVNAF in order to develop their military capabilities. He argued that regular ARVN forces should be used as clearing forces to locate and engage enemy main force units with the more mobile U.S. forces in reserve to strike and complete the destruction of the enemy.[297]

Taylor's prediction was eerily prescient, as will become evident over the remainder of this chapter and the next. U.S forces assumed responsibility for the majority of all major (brigade and above) offensive operations to defeat PAVN and PLAF forces and logistical areas, which they planned and conducted on their own initiative. In a separate effort, the RVNAF were given the task of securing the urban and coastal areas. In some cases, combined operations integrating RVNAF and U.S. units were conducted (and will be discussed further below), however this was more of the exception rather than the rule in this middle period of the war.[298]

Pacification was a critical requirement for restoring South Vietnamese government control over their territory and gaining the support of the population. The RVNAF's pacification mission involved military operations to expel PLAF from selected areas followed first by police efforts to uproot the PLAF political infrastructure and intelligence networks. This second effort was accompanied by simultaneous efforts to

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[296] Msg, Wheeler JCS 4500-65 to Westmoreland, (06 Nov 65), COMUSMACV Message file. Westmoreland Papers, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.
[297] Msg, Wheeler JCS 4500-65.
[298] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 57.

rebuild local infrastructure and schools and reestablish local government and public services.[299]

However, focusing the RVNAF almost exclusively on these operations led to a focus on small unit operations at the battalion level and below. Given the extensive involvement of RVNAF military leaders with political and administrative responsibilities this produced an unfortunate side effect – the atrophy of command and staff effectiveness at the regimental level and above. In later years when the RVNAF was rapidly handed sole responsibility for security operations, this lack of experience and requisite systems and processes to command and control larger military forces would prove a critical shortfall for the RVNAF.

Alongside the U.S. buildup, the RNAF continued to expand, and by March 1966 had reached a size of 273,000 Army, 15,000 Navy, 13,000 Air Force, and 7100 Marines. 135,000 Regional Forces and 137,000 Popular Forces – a total of 520,000 men under arms. The ten ARVN regular divisions were assigned from north to south in static security zones under each of the four Corps, with twenty Ranger battalions also spread out to the Corps. The Airborne division and Marines constituted a national reserve available for deployment throughout the country.[300] By the end of the period all of these infantry forces – as well as the RF and PF – had now been equipped with modern M-16 rifles, LAW antitank rockets, and 90mm recoilless rifles.

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[299] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 17.
[300] Troung, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 141

From 1966 to 1968, further expansion efforts focused on developing RVNAF combined arms and joint capabilities. The Marines were doubled in size to a force of two brigades, each with three brigades. Both the ARVN regular divisions, the Airborne, and the Marines received their own organic 105mm howitzer battalions and the Corps received longer range 155mm artillery battalions.[301] The armored force expanded to eleven mixed squadrons of APCs and tanks, and upgraded to new M41 light tanks. The VNAF more than doubled its size to a force of five fighter/ground attack squadrons, four observation squadrons, five helicopter and three fixed wing transport squadrons and modernized its fighter and observation aircraft.[302]

Over the course of 1966 and 1967, both the U.S. and North Vietnamese settled into a war of attrition as American forces mounted a series of offensive operations designed to drive the enemy away from populated areas. [303] Substantial reinforcements continued to flow into South Vietnam, bringing total U.S. forces to 525,000.[304] Willing to pay a high price for victory, the North Vietnamese also decided to intensify the war and reinforced their forces in the south in attempt to gear up for the 'big unit' war with the Americans. In a growing conventional war, PAVN and PLAF emphasized large battles as both sides sought to win a war of attrition.[305] American forces struck ever deeper into

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[301] Khuyen, 9. The RVNAF now had twenty-four 105mm battalions and six 155mm battalions.
[302] Khuyen, 9-10. The fighter squadrons were now equipped with A1s, A37s, and F-5s and the observation squadrons now flew O1 and U-17 aircraft, while the helicopters and fixed wing transport squadrons remained equipped with the older H34 helicopter and WWII era C-47.
[303] George L. McGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive - October 1966 to October 1967*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1998), 11.
[304] Erik B. Villard, *Combat Operations: Staying the Course - October 1967 to September 1968*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 2017), 6.
[305] McGarrigle, 17.

communist strongholds and caused heavy casualties, but domestic dissatisfaction in America rose and President Johnson repeatedly opposed U.S. and South Vietnamese plans to expand the war into North Vietnam or neighboring Laos or Cambodia.[306]

As 1968 approached, North Vietnam gambled on a carefully planned series of operations to sever popular support for the RVNAF and surprise their American allies with a general offensive striking cities across South Vietnam. In late 1967, a series of peripheral attacks on border areas such as Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri province drew U.S. attention and combat forces.[307] The North Vietnamese strategic surprise during the Vietnamese Tet holiday was successful - a series of attacks by infiltrated PLAF and PAVN forces took place at cities throughout South Vietnam on January 30 and February 1, 1968 and shocked South Vietnam, the U.S. and the world.[308]

Overall, the planned general offensive was a devastating battlefield defeat for the North. Rather than disintegrating as anticipated, ARVN forces across the country stood their ground and generally fought well in repelling the assaults, although suffering heavy casualties.[309] A series of U.S. counteroffensives following Tet further damaged PAVN. In April and May the North Vietnamese chose to launch a second and then a third offensive. Each was less intense than its predecessor and both further gutted PAVN and PLAF units still recovering from Tet and the continuing US-South Vietnamese counteroffensives.[310] Another byproduct of these assaults was the greater integration of

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[306] Villard, 4-6.
[307] Palmer, 210-218.
[308] Palmer, 240-241.
[309] Villard, 442-443.
[310] Villard, 589; 671.

US and RVNAF forces in the ensuing counteroffensives. Part of this was a natural need to work closely driven by the fact that most of these battles took place in the more heavily populated areas which were the responsibility of the RVNAF. However, this integration was also due to the influence of a new MACV Commander, GEN Creighton Abrams, who had succeeded Westmoreland in July, 1968 and will be discussed further in the next chapter. [311]

By September 1968, U.S. forces had grown to 538,000 personnel, while the RVNAF stood at 843,000. The South Vietnamese government had weathered the storm, and had intensified measures to make its military more effective. The North had suffered devastating losses and the PLAF in particular had been gutted.[312] This was a remarkable turnaround from where South Vietnam had stood – on the brink of defeat – in early 1965.

The aggressive efforts of the US, Australian and South Korean allies alongside of the RVNAF from 1965 to 1968 produced a significant turn-around in the security of South Vietnam.[313] Search and destroy operations by America and its allies drove the major PAVN and PLAF forces to their base areas along the border. Meanwhile, strides were made in rebuilding the RVNAF into a more competent and effective force while it simultaneously performed the pacification mission in urban and coastal areas.[314] The 1968 "Tet" offensive and a series of subsequent communist offensives were disastrous for the North Vietnamese on the battlefield, eviscerating both the PLAF military and

[311] Villard, 597,679.
[312] Villard, 673.
[313] Khuyen, 9. New Zealand and Thailand also committed smaller force contributions to South Vietnam as part of the "Free World Military Assistance" effort of U.S. allies.
[314] Khuyen, 9.

political leadership to such an extent that they were not a significant factor for the remainder of the war. Unfortunately, despite the real gains on the battlefield and in RVNAF performance, the Tet offensive was disastrous for the US in the realm of information operations, producing a decisive loss of American will at home that impacted its strategy for the remainder of the conflict.

Patron Intervention: Training

During 1965 and 1966, much of the United States training effort was focused on rebuilding and expanding the RVNAF. While the initial entry training infrastructure was expanded and the RVNAF grew numerically, questions continued regarding the quality of training by the South Vietnamese. Few overall improvements in training quality were made, although the throughput in the various initial training centers was maintained and the flow of new units and replacements was maintained. Additionally, refresher training by RVNAF units remained virtually nonexistent.

Although efforts to improve formal and informal training for enlisted personnel other than through the conduct of actual operations was minimal, structural improvements in promotion and retention processes did begin to improve the quality of officers and NCOs.

One of the side effects of the effort to expand the armed forces was the late 1964 extension of the legal term of military service from two years for all soldiers to three years for junior enlisted personnel and four years for NCO's and officers. Over time, this allowed the RVNAF to retain a greater number of experienced cadre members to build

their expanding force around, and providing a greater number of combat-experienced soldiers and small unit leaders across the force[315]

A major effort during this period was an increased emphasis on leadership training. In 1966, MACV began working with the South Vietnamese to develop a number of systemic improvements. This included more intense leadership training at the Vietnamese Military Academy and the revision of the program of instruction at the Command and General Staff College. In 1968, a National Defense College was established to educate high ranking officers and career government civilians. At the national training center, the top ten percent of each basic/advanced individual training company were given additional training in leadership and small unit tactics and assigned as squad and platoon leaders for the next two cycles.[316]

After January 1967, MACV began to place a greater emphasis on quality within the fielded units. This was a similar priority for JGS chief of Staff GEN Vien, who wrote to GEN Westmoreland and requested his assistance in improving substandard units.[317] Under Westmoreland's guidance, in 1967 MACV's Military Assistance Program Directorate identified a number of units to the JGS as unsatisfactory and MACV threatened the JGS with curtailment of the operational support funds for these units.[318] The money was never withheld as the RVNAF initiated remedial action deemed sufficient by the U.S. MAP officials generally observed that deficient leadership was the

[315] Khuyen, 13
[316] Collins, 78-79.
[317] Collins, 70.
[318] RVNAF expansion and the majority of the RVNAF budget was paid for by U.S. military assistance dollars

proximate cause of these unit shortfalls, drawing a direct link in almost every case between substandard leaders and defective unit training programs.[319]

As MACV over time became satisfied that U.S. forces in Vietnam were adequately equipped for Vietnam, they began a greater effort to equip RVNAF combat forces, resulting in U.S. on-the-job training teams accompanying the provision of new equipment. In 1965, the AR-15 rifle was a state-of-the-art weapon urgently requested by the JGS to equip its forces in the face of the PAVN invasion. However, as U.S. forces were only just being issued this weapon, the decision to deploy American combat forces to Vietnam caused the rifles bound for the RVNAF to be diverted to the U.S. military.[320]

In 1967 mobile training teams, finally began to issue the M-16 rifle, M-60 light machine gun and LAW antitank rifle to South Vietnamese airborne and marine battalions. When the Tet offensive began in early 1968, the U.S. made a massive effort to issue the M-16 to the entire RVNAF down to and including the RF and PF. Emergency airlifts brought in vast stocks of weapons and hastily assembled combined teams of US and South Vietnamese traveled throughout the country to equip RVNAF units and provide a modicum of training in use and maintenance of the new rifles. Occurring as major fighting was in progress, this made an overnight improvement in the performance of individual RVNAF soldiers across the force. Following Tet, the U.S. continued with its rapid upgrade program and rapidly trained and equipped the entire RVNAF with the M-60 machine gun, LAW, and 90mm rocket launchers.[321]

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[319] Collins, 71.
[320] Khuyen, 60-61.
[321] Khuyen, 61.

Overall during this period, the U.S. was unable to make major changes to incentivize improvements in initial entry training quality for enlisted personnel or in regularized collective training for units outside of combat. The ability to retain experienced personnel longer did alleviate *some* of these shortfalls. More positive was the deployment of mobile training teams for specific purposes such as M-16 fielding. When U.S. training assets were committed they tended to make significant quality increases in the units that they trained. Another positive effort was the significant expansion of training and education resources for officers, which began to improve the quality of new officers and those able to attend the training. Over time this would slowly lead to the greater professionalization of the officer corps, although this would be a generational improvement that would take time to percolate up through the ranks.

Patron Intervention: Command and Control

Following the coup against Diem, the degree of personal control exercised by the President was replaced with a scheme representing the need for this largely military-run government to share a degree of power with its division and corps commanders after their involvement in repeated military coups. With national security trumping all other government requirements, the province and district administrations – still filled largely by military officers – now became subordinate to the division and corps commanders responsible for the security of their area.[322] ARVN divisions had already been largely static and confined to specific areas of operation before U.S. forces took the lead. Under the new pacification mission, this static nature increased.

[322] Clarke, 72.

Although it also served as an army headquarters, the Republic of Vietnam's Joint General Staff (JGS) carried out administrative and planning functions for the entire RFNAF and interacted directly with its theater level counterpart – the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam. Due to an abortive mutiny by senior naval officers in April 1965, the Navy Command was under the close control by the JGS. However, the Air Force, Airborne, and Marine commands also associated with the JGS retained much greater degrees of autonomy benefitting from personal relationships between their commanders and Ky (the VNAF and Marine Division) and Thieu (the Airborne Division).[323]

The JGS's Operations Directorate was responsible for allocating rangers, armor, artillery, military police, special forces, and territorial forces to the various corps and special commands existed within the JGS for their administration. Day to employment of these elements was exercised by the individual corps to which they were assigned. The JGS had no functional staff for intelligence and little control over or coordination with the multiple intelligence agencies operating throughout South Vietnam. Most importantly, although the JGS was able to monitor the actions of the individual corps commands, it had no command responsibility over these organizations. During the period of collective military leadership, these operated with great autonomy. Over time they came to report more directly to Thieu, particularly after the resolution of the 1966 Buddhist crisis.[324]

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[323] Clarke, 26.
[324] Clarke, 26.

MACV attempts to form a combined U.S.-South Vietnamese Command in 1965

In March 1965, a MACV staff study recommended establishing a combined American-Vietnamese military staff to create a more effective command structure to coordinate the activities of the RVNAF and the U.S. combat forces now increasingly flowing into South Vietnam. This plan saw extensive input from both Pacific Command leadership as well as Westmoreland. Planners assessed that such an organization would increase U.S. influence over the RVNAF and "moderate the behavior" of what was seen as an increasingly fragmented South Vietnamese chain of command into a more effective one.[325] With U.S. combat forces now increasingly flowing into South Vietnam, U.S. planners sought to implement the sort of unified command structure which had worked quite effectively for the United Nations in Korea.[326]

At the national level, a U.S. general and an RVNAF deputy would run a coordinating staff to provide directives wherever U.S. and RVN forces were geographically collocated or adjacent or had combined missions assigned to them. This would give Americans de facto control of RVNAF forces in US-South Vietnamese operations. Below the national level (ie in the field), coordination measures between RFVAF and U.S. forces would be more ad hoc – combined staffs would be created when U.S. and South Vietnamese needed to work together or there would be an exchange of liaison officers between headquarters at a minimum. Over time, a "politically palatable and operationally effective transition command arrangement" would be structured to

[325] Clarke, 88.
[326] Clarke, 87.

increase the RFVNAF role, but for the moment they would work largely under U.S. control.[327]

In May 1965, this concept was further fleshed out by Brigadier General Lawton Collins, the officer designated by Westmoreland to address joint planning. The original American-dominated structure was trimmed down into a more truly combined headquarters concept. The new combined command would work under the joint (ie co-equal) leadership of both GEN Westmoreland and his RVNAF counterpart, GEN Vien, assisted by an American chief of staff and a South Vietnamese deputy – each supported by a combined American and Vietnamese secretariat. Of the six primary staff functions, the personnel and intelligence functions would be run by Vietnamese officers with American deputies and mixed staffs. Logistics, Plans, and Communications would be structured the opposite – with American primaries and Vietnamese deputies and mixed staffs. The operations staff would be mixed. This new headquarters would have no specific operational responsibilities as it built its processes, but would eventually become responsible for directing all military operations in South Vietnam, with MACV and the JGS both eventually becoming subsumed by this new structure.[328]

Despite the best intentions of American leaders and their initial optimism for the approach, the plan soon lost steam. By mid-April 1965, Admiral Sharp cautioned GEN Westmoreland that any organizational changes should be incremental and the U.S. could not afford a one-year shake-down program."[329] When Westmoreland tentatively pushed

[327] Clarke, 88.
[328] Clarke, 90.
[329] Clarke, 90-91.

Collins' plan to JGS leadership, the South Vietnamese responded by strongly opposed the prospective measure. Both Thieu and Ky apparently saw this as strong challenge to their sovereignty and national pride. It also likely would have impacted the ongoing leadership struggle between the two and exposed the significant corruption rampant throughout the senior levels of the RVNAF. Theiu and Ky each issued press statements on the "undesirability" of unified or combined command structures. Ambassador Taylor assessed that someone (likely Vietnamese) had leaked the U.S. proposals to the press, which then responded with a number of commentaries critical of such command arrangements.[330]

There was no senior level U.S. political pressure to push these arrangements further. Despite the enormous aid package which the U.S. was providing to South Vietnam, there was no use of any sort of conditionality. This would be the most significant effort at combined operations in the entire war – one which would have reflected best practices from recent U.S. experience in Korea. However, this significant opportunity never went anywhere and was soon forgotten.

Establishment of U.S. Corps Commands mirroring the RVNAF

After failing to create a joint US-South Vietnamese command structure, GEN Westmoreland and MACV controlled U.S. forces independently while coordinating with (and advising) the JGS. Alongside the RVNAF I, II and III Corps, he similarly established U.S. corps-sized field commands to directly command and control U.S. forces

[330] Clarke, 92.

and to ensure coordination with and advise the RVNAF in the region. The IV Corps zone in the Mekong River Delta was left uncovered and would not receive a partnered U.S. command until much later in 1969 (detailed in the next chapter)

The USMC's III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) was activated in May 1965 and was co-located with the I Corps headquarters in Da Nang. Normally USMC corps-sized headquarters elements are called Marine "Expeditionary" Forces. However, this had too much of a similarity with the earlier French Expeditionary Corps so the name was changed to "amphibious." To the south, I Field Force Vietnam (I FFV) was activated in Septermber 1965 in the coastal city of Nha Trang and partnered with the RVNAF II Corps headquarters two provinces away in Pleiku. Finally, II Field Force, Vietnam was established in March 1966 and co-located with the RVNAF III Corps headquarters in Bien Hoa. As with III MEF, these built around existing U.S. Army corps headquarters. However, in an attempt to avoid confusion with a U.S. and RVNAF "Corps" operating in the same area, the U.S. structures were named "field forces" (Nevertheless, they essentially still did the same thing as a corps headquarters.[331]

Mixed Efforts to Improve Pacification Command and Control

Although securing the population was the primary responsibility of territorial (Regional Force and Popular Force) units under the direction of provincial and district leaders, their frequent need for support by South Vietnamese or American regular forces led to problems in coordination.[332] In such cases who had primacy? ARVN regimental

[331] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 47-48.
[332] Clarke, 72.

and battalion commanders or the provincial and district chiefs who were also military officers? Although the political leaders theoretically had direct authority this often led to confusion in the field and the coordination of regular and territorial forces in combat remained difficult – as it had under the Diem regime.

A March 1966 US. Army Staff proposal proposed several organizational changes to reduce this confusion and improve the pacification campaign. A new higher-level U.S. military command would replace the dual efforts of the U.S. Ambassador's Mission Council and MACV and have authority over all capacity building efforts – both military and non-military. American influence over the South Vietnamese government would be clarified and formalized through negotiated written agreements that would increase American leverage. South Vietnamese divisions would be removed from the chain of command for regional pacification operations, giving primacy to the provincial and district headquarters (which were now being fielded with U.S. advisors). Where necessary, ARVN battalions would be assigned directly to provincial headquarters to provide additional combat power.[333]

A May 1966 US Embassy study group of military and civilian experts made similar recommendations to improve the pacification campaign. Among the eighty-one recommendations the group produced were calls for the removal of ARVN division headquarters from the security chain of command, reassignment of the bulk of ARVN infantry battalions to provincial commands to perform area security, relieving the CIDG

[333] Clarke, 173-174.

of its territorial security functions save in remote areas, and merging the territorial forces with the Field Force Police into a constabulary force.[334]

Despite these calls for organizational restructuring, MACV Commander GEN William Westmoreland resisted both teams' recommendations, believing them overly ambitious and/or unachievable. Although both groups of outside experts held that the involvement of division headquarters in security operations significantly hampered battlefield coordination, Westmoreland argued that senior Vietnamese commanders would strongly oppose the removal of division headquarters from the pacification campaign's chain of command and similarly resist the detachment of their forces to province chiefs. Additionally, he worried that greater American control over the South Vietnamese would confirm enemy propaganda that the South Vietnamese government was a puppet regime and that such changes to RVNAF command arrangements would create unnecessary turmoil and confusion and might invite defeat in detail. Finally, he felt that transforming the territorials into a type of police force was premature.[335]

The greatest impact on overall ARVN command and control capabilities remained the damaging impact of the overall division of labor between the U.S. and RVNAF forces. The pacification mission did not stress the RVNAF chain of command. Because of the static nature of the missions involved, RVNAF corps commanders had little military requirements until the Tet Offensive. What little planning was required was often addressed by their peer U.S. Field Force commanders. Because of the immense

[334] Clarke, 175.
[335] Clarke, 174-175.

capabilities that they controlled and from their role as senior advisors, these U.S. commander did possess significant influence. However, little of this influence was directly focused on improving RVNAF command and control.

The most egregious case of an RVNAF Corps level commander who did not directly impact his subordinate forces on a regular case was LTG Nguyen Khang. Khang served as a member of the National Leadership Committee (through the 1967 elections), as the III Corps commander and Saigon military governor (both through the Tet Offensive), and as the Commander of the Marine Division.[336] These multiple requirements would over-tax any senior leader in any government. Until the RVNAF were challenged with a set of normal missions, leadership inefficiencies such as that posed by LTG Khang would continue to plague RVNAF ability to create an effective system to command and control their forces.

One area where MACV was more successful in influencing improvement was with command and control of the RVNAF's territorial forces. Although the paramilitary forces of the Regional Forces and Popular Forces constituted approximately half of all RVNAF manpower, their performance remained generally marginal. A major contributing factor in this poor performance was their separate chain of command under provincial leadership, which not only made command and control of operations difficult, but resulted in lower priority for equipment and training. In September 1966, the South Vietnamese government sought to remedy this by integrating the RF and PF under the control of the regular military commands, and establishing an integrating staff element

[336] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 59.

within the JGS to oversee the process. Territorials were still under the direct authority of district and provincial leaders, but these leaders – all ARVN officers themselves by this point – now fell under the control of ARVN division commanders in whose zone they fell. By integrating operations, administration, and logistics under the responsible tactical commanders in their area, greater unity of effort could be achieved in the pacification campaign. The process of sorting out command relationships took until mid-1967 to resolve, but resulted in improved effectiveness at the local level.[337]

MAVC efforts to push the improved integration of the RVNAF hierarchy for control of territorial forces occurred just as the U.S. was integrating its own hierarchy in the pacification area, producing one of the most influential and successful American innovations in the entire Vietnam war.

The Creation of CORDS

In April 1967, the centralization of U.S. military and non-military support to pacification efforts under a new MACV directorate for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development (CORDS), created major improvements in U.S. advisory efforts at the district and provincial level. The centralization of civilian and military advisory staffs synchronized U.S. support to territorial forces as well as provided better support to the myriad non-military tasks involved in running districts and provinces. The creation of CORDS was a decision by President Johnson, ending a long running dispute (including the multiple proposals discussed above) between proponents of the merger such as the CIA and National Security Staff and military leaders such as GEN

[337] Collins, 72-73.

Westmoreland, wary of tasks that weren't seen as purely military and civilian agency heads in Saigon unwilling to surrender their authority. Nevertheless, the merger was finally accomplished and CORDS was placed under the leadership of Robert Komer, a CIA veteran and former acting U.S. national security advisor who ran the organization through 1973.[338]

The advisory programs for the RF and PF – previously separate – were now consolidated under CORDS program, greatly improving the coordination of U.S. efforts in pacification support. Because divisional RVNAF forces were still assigned to the pacification role along with territorial forces, CORDS advisors were required to coordinate daily with the U.S. advisors from the tactical side to ensure that they were mutually supporting each other. The end result of the creation of a U.S. organization solely devoted to pacification efforts was a major increase of resources and targeted assistance that greatly improved the South Vietnamese elements on the receiving end. Over time, efforts to develop RF and PF from being a paramilitary force into a more professionalized territorial force, although this would take years to generate significant progress. Former I Corps commander LTG Ngo Truong observed that from this time forward RF and PF combat performance gradually began to significantly improve and they began to look and act increasingly like "full-fledged soldiers."[339]

The addition of the able Komer, an able and aggressive organizational manager – to the MACV senior staff again brought a push to create a combined U.S. and South

[338] Clarke, 210-211.
[339] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 189.

Vietnamese command structure. Echoing earlier efforts by Westmoreland and his staff in 1965, Komer sought to place RVNAF units either under direct American control or at least in some sort of unified command arrangement. He gained support from the staff in the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense, who raised the issue as well. However, Westmoreland was now in firm opposition to such an effort, arguing that he had extensive influence over JGS chief GEN Vien and that in such a command the U.S "would be committed much more than we wanted to." Despite Westmoreland's apparently oversized estimation of his influence (most of the evidence appears to the contrary) and the already massive U.S. commitment to South Vietnam (it is hard to imagine how the U.S. could have been much more 'committed' to South Vietnam by the latter months of 1967, at the near height of U.S. support…), U.S. leadership chose to accept the status quo and did not intervene to improve the acknowledged shortfalls in RVNAF command and control.

Immediately following its creation in 1967, CORDS implemented the highly successful, although somewhat controversial Phoenix program, which resulted in the dramatic reduction of the command and control network directing PLAF operations at the local level. CORDS used the Phoenix program to target, capture, and kill communist leaders directing PLAF recruitment and coordinating terrorist and intimidation targeting local GVN government leaders and other centers of resistance. Under CORDS, the new Phoenix program was integrated with pre-existing U.S influenced efforts to improve local security, which CORDS now further energized. The first, was a U.S. led effort begun in 1966 to increase the Ministry of Interior's National Police forces and transition them

from a purely law and order function in large towns and cities to a paramilitary role aiding security and intelligence efforts at the village and hamlet level. The second was the 'Revolutionary development' program, small groups of GVN experts travelled to outlying areas to provide reconstruction and development assistance and win the support of local populations.[340]

The Phoenix program coordinated intelligence and security cooperation among the sector (province) intelligence officer, the National Police Field Force, Special Police, and Provincial Reconnaisance Units, Revolutionary Development Cadre, the Chieu Hoi program of converted PLAF members, and the Military Security Service (the RVNAF's counter-intelligence organization) and supported them with U.S. intelligence. Intelligence was coordinated and passed to National Police elements which killed or captured designated targets. It was overseen at the provincial level by representatives of the different involved agencies as well as provincial and district chiefs and representatives of the respective RVNAF corps commander. Captured PLAF personnel were sent to prisoner of war camps and civilian agitators were referred for nonjudicial "trial" by the provincial police chief. The initiative began as a CORDS (and CIA)-driven effort informally approved by the GVN, but was formally authorized by President Thieu in a 1968 executive decree. Although the program was criticized as unconstitutional due to

[340] Tran Dinh Tho, "Pacification," (1980), In *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals*, edited by Lewis Sorley, 214-264, (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2010) 228, 230-231.

the lack of true legal process it was highly effective, killing or capturing 1/3 of an estimated 40,000 VCI ("Viet Cong Infrastructure") by 1971.[341]

Improving Ranger Command and Control

Another area which the Embassy study had signaled out for improvement was the poor performance of the Ranger battalions – the study had recommended they be folded back into regular infantry units. There was universal agreement among American commanders that in their present capacity piecemealed out to corps and division headquarters companies they were not being used correctly.[342] Additionally, these units had continuously been near universally accused of overly aggressive behavior towards civilians and had generally proved ineffective in pacification missions.

Both Westmoreland and JGS Chief of Staff GEN Vien agreed that the rangers were being misused, but both thought they could be useful for offensive missions in the jungles and on the rapid reaction missions for which they had been trained. Westmoreland conveyed his strong concern over Ranger unit performance to Vien and threatened to withdraw US military assistance program support to these units if they failed to improve. Although MACV regarded Vien's first suggested recommendation of forming the widely scattered Rangers into separate divisions as part of the GVN's general reserve forces as too ambitious, they did support Vien's creation of five new "ranger group" headquarters to serve as administrative and logistical links between corps headquarters and the ranger battalions overseen by new head of Ranger Command

[341] Tho, "Pacification," 233-235. The program resulted in 5615 killed, 4391 detained, and 5597 released for lack of sufficient evidence.
[342] Clarke, 175.

underneath the JGS. In later years these ranger groups would see greater use as South Vietnam transitioned to its own offensive operations. For the time being however, the ranger groups were ignored by the politically powerful corps commanders and ranger units remained parceled out to work directly for corps, division, and regimental commanders with little effectiveness.[343]

MACV Forward – US Army and USMC Friction comes to a head in 1968

The 3rd Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), the U.S. corps headquarters responsible for operations and advising in the 1st CTZ in the northern regions of South Vietnam, was nominally under the command of MACV. However, the desire of III MAF's USMC-centric headquarters to preserve their independence from the largely Army-run higher headquarters at MACV had long been a source of tension which reached a near crisis point in early 1968. The tension between the two commands resulted from a number of factors which included not only traditional Army-Marine rivalry but also disputes over control of III MAF's Marine Air Wing and differences in opinion regarding U.S. prioritization of offensive over pacification operations. From late 1967 onward these differences of opinion also included III MAF commander Lt Gen Cushman's opposition to MACV's single-minded focus on the PAVN forces laying siege to the remote USMC outpost at Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri province along the Laotian border.[344]

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[343] Clarke, 177.
[344] Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 2006), 44-45.

Additionally, III MAF was challenged by an extremely large span of control. At the beginning of the year, III MAF was responsible for overseeing over 100,000 Americans including two Marine and one Army division headquarters. In mid-January 1968 it received an additional Army division, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to help defeat the PAVN around Khe Sanh – III MAF now contained half of all MACV's ground combat power. The corps headquarters was responsible for managing two different

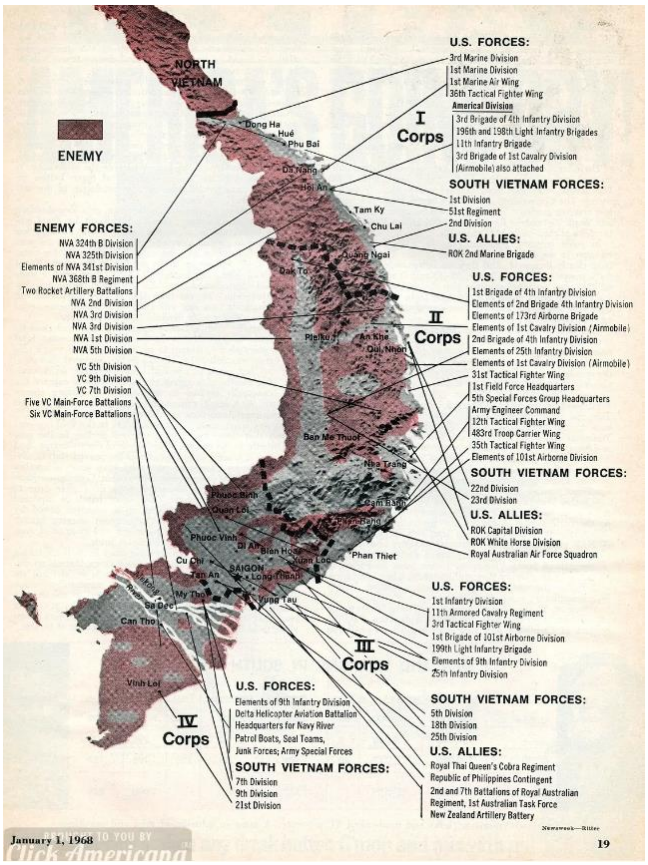

Figure 9: Allied and Estimated Enemy Forces in South Vietnam, Jan 1, 1968[345]

[345] Vietnam War Map from *Newsweek*, Jan 1 1968. Retrieved from https://clickamericana.com/topics/war-topics/vietnam-war-map-corps-to-corps-1968

campaigns in this CTZ that had produced half of all allied and enemy casualties the previous year. The first was management of a conventional infantry and artillery conflict from fixed firebases along the DMZ and Laotian border in the two northern provinces. The second was a mixture of large unit battles and counter-guerilla operations in the three southern provinces.[346]

Westermoreland's solution to this was the creation of MACV Forward, a temporary headquarters led by his deputy, US Army GEN Creighton Abrams, to be based at Phu Bai Combat Base just south of Hue in I Corp's Thua Thien Province. Westmoreland's plan, which underwent several revisions was the fiercely opposed by marines on his staff and in III MAF. On 25 Feb, Westmoreland informed Pacific Command Commander Admiral Sharp of his desire to create a "provisional field army" (ie the command above a corps headquarters) at Phu Bai with operational control over "all US ground elements in 1CTZ (including III MAF)" with "primary emphasis" on the two northern provinces and with "maneuver authority" over the RVNAF units in the area.[347]

If successfully established, such a four-star headquarters in the north would have helped improve the many burdens placed upon the northernmost US command as well as significantly improving the coordination between U.S. and RVNAF forces. It potentially could have meant the regular incorporation of South Vietnamese forces into major combat operations and reduced confusion between the continuing problems of the US-led

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[346] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 45-46; Jack Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," Marine Corps Historical Center manuscript, (1991), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/107/1071520003.pdf, 2.
[347] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 47.*

‘big-unit’ war and the pacification campaign being fought simultaneously but in a largely uncoordinated fashion in the same country. However, Westmoreland’s plan represented a challenge to both the US Marines in South Vietnam and the RVNAF command structure. After a conference with JGS Chief GEN Vien, Westmoreland dropped the concept of ‘maneuver authority’ over RVNAF forces and changed this to a counterpart relation with I Corps Commander LTG Lam.[348] It was then further modified to reduce confrontation with III MAF.

By late January, MACV moved ahead with a revised plan for MACV Forward. The new headquarters would be established in early February at Phu Bai and operational by March. Abrams would take over operational command of the combat units in I CTZ, while III MAF would be elevated to something akin to a field army headquarters to focus on advisory, logistical and support requirements. Eventually, it was planned that MACV Forward would transition to become a more permanent headquarters known as Provisional Corps, Vietnam.[349]

The North Vietnamese Tet Offensive – initiated on January 31, 1968 – moved the MACV plan forward and again renewed Westmoreland’s (and Abrams’) lack of trust in Lt Gen Cushman. Concerned with a perceived crisis in the north, Westmoreland had Abrams activate MACV-Forward ahead of schedule on February 9 and with authority to issue orders to Cushman if necessary and assume direct command if necessary. While Abrams ended using his authority with restraint and intervening only where he felt it

[348] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 47.*
[349] Villard, 273.

necessary, some III MAF personnel felt this complicated an already difficult command situation when Abrams intermittently chose to issue orders directly to subordinate units.[350]

With the conclusion of Tet, a more efficient command and control system was established for the Americans in I Corps. MACV-Forward was replaced by Provisional Corps, Vietnam on March 10, with US Army Lt Gen Rosson moving north from I Field Force to take command. Rosson was now responsible for operational control of U.S. forces in the northern two provinces. As III MAF Commander, Cushman was responsible for operational control of U.S. forces in the southern three provinces as well as CTZ-wide responsibility for managing advisory and pacification coordination with I Corps.[351]

While the end result was a satisfactory improvement for U.S. command and control and created greater partnership opportunities with adjacent RVNAF units, it created significant confusion during the critical Tet Offensive. The overlapping U.S. command and control system had in some ways duplicated the same issues that Americans faulted in the South Vietnamese system. Additionally, as will be seen in this chapter's discussion of the Battle of Hue during the Tet Offensive below, the lack of a unity of command on the American side confused interaction with their RVNAF partners. This did not end up compromising the outcome, but it was nevertheless an inefficient process in a critical period.

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[350] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 75-76.
[351] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 77.

Patron Intervention: Promotions/Advancement

The greatest obstacle to developing an effective combat forces was perceived to be the lack of qualified officer and non-commissioned officer leadership. As BG Lawton Collins observed, "Battalion and company commanders were often inexperienced and lacked initiative; few operations were conducted in the absence of detailed orders. Senior commanders issued directives, but failed to supervise the execution, and results were usually negligible. U.S. advisors continually cited poor leadership as the foremost reason for unit ineffectiveness."[352]

In December 1965, the National Leadership Committee issued Decree number 205, which for the first time formalized the system for promotions and authority. With this order, authority for promotion to various ranks was spread out among the various levels of command. This was a marked improvement and provided an important step towards professionalizing promotions towards a more merit-based process for a majority of the officer ranks. Notably, however, LTG Thieu – the chairman of the National Leadership committee retained the ability to appoint the Chief, Deputy Chief, and Chief of Staff of the JGS, the ARVN Corps Commanders, the heads of the navy and air force, and the provincial chiefs. The Defense Minister (also a National Leadership Committee member at the time) was now responsible for appointing the heads of logistics, training, and the various directorates of the ministries. The Chief of the JGS, General Vien, was

[352] Collins, 75.

given the power to appoint the heads of the service branches and combat arms and division commanders, sector commanders, and the commanders of separate units.[353]

At the time, this seemed to push down the authority for senior level promotions several levels away from the top constituting a significant improvement. However, a loophole at the time later became a significant problem issue which "re-centralized" authority back with the President. Decree # 205 also gave the Chairman of the NLC the sole authority in promoting all generals. In 1965, this was not as much of a problem, as the number of generals in the RVNAF and positions filled in other countries by more senior ranks were in South Vietnam still held by lower ranks. For example, as seen by the Ap Bac example, many of the division commanders of the time were still colonels. Over the following years, however, the RVNAF force structure and the number of general officers expanded significantly. Additionally, almost all sector commanders soon became dual hatted as province chiefs. The decree was never revoked, and Thieu increasingly gained back a great deal of centralized appointment power over senior officers as a result of this convenient loophole.[354]

With the formation of the Second Republic in 1967, elective democracy significantly reduced military involvement in politics. While President Thieu retained the ability to select senior commanders through the end of the war, this overall reduction of political involvement allowed a more professional system emphasizing merit to take hold below the general officer level. The increasing role of officers selected by these new

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[353] Khuyen, 15.
[354] Khuyen, 15-16.

systems moving up through the ranks greatly strengthened RVNAF command and control capabilities.[355] However, the impacts of the 1963 coup and subsequent maneuvering were lasting and politics remained ingrained among many of the most senior commanders to such a degree that GEN Vien later observed that it was impossible for them "to relinquish it and return to military professionalism."[356] The Thieu regime continued to fear rivalry from the inside from politically ambitious commanders more than the North Vietnamese.[357]

Under MACV guidance, the RVNAF formed a Command Leadership Committee composed of the JGS chairman and five general officers focusing on implementing comprehensive programs to improve leadership quality throughout the force in July 1966. Beginning in 1968, the annual RVNAF officer promotions process utilized efficiency reports in the selection process for the first time and established a degree of transparency by publishing the number of officers considered, how many were selected, and the point average used in selection. The committee also implemented a centralized selection process for attendance at the Saigon Command and General Staff College rather than the previous system of allocating quotas to subordinate commands.[358]

The most significant (and successful) MACV intervention in RVNAF promotions from 1965 to 1968 occurred at the very end of this period, immediately following the Tet Offensive. This general offensive tested the mettle of RVNAF leaders throughout the system. Although MACV leaders were pleased overall, several commanders were

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[355] Vien, "Leadership," 314.
[356] Vien, "Leadership," 316.
[357] Vien, "Leadership," 316.
[358] Collins, 76-77.

conspicuous disappointments. In March 1968, GEN Westmoreland pressured President Thieu to "clean house," leading to the replacement of the II and IV Corps commanders and nine provincial chiefs.[359]

This pressure led to a number of significant improvements at senior levels - Westmoreland reported to U.S. Pacific Command commander Admiral Sharp that "[t]his housecleaning in the wake of [the] Tet offensive…is a distinct plus".[360] Americans deemed the new II Commander as competent and effective but were most impressed with the transfer of the Minister of Revolutionary Development, LTG Nguyen Duc Thang, to become the IV Corps commander. A highly experienced and dynamic commander, Thang was reported as "a breath of fresh air in IV Corps".[361] President Thieu also named a highly capable and aggressive officer, LTG Do Cao Tri, to become the new commander of III Corps, which had been temporarily commanded by the Marine Corps commandant, who was filling both positions simultaneously.[362]

The influx of much more competent officers left the RVNAF in a better position for the increased operations that were soon to come. While a positive step, however, it was not a full housecleaning. Leadership inefficiency and inexperience at the senior levels of I Corps would be devastating for the RVNAF in 1971 and 1972, covered in the next chapter.

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[359] Villard, 443.
[360] Villard, 443.
[361] Villard, 443.
[362] Villard, 645.

Combat Force Commitment: Independent operations with Advisors (and limited partnering in I CTZ)

With the RVNAF in disarray following the extended period of coup instability, MACV and JGS leaders planned the rapid expansion of the advisory effort to accompany the buildup of U.S. combat forces. After a highly successful April/May 1964 pilot program around Saigon, advisors were increasingly pushed to work at the district level in each province from 1965 over the next several years. Although the efforts to supply adequate personnel competed with U.S. Army efforts to staff its combat formations in the field, as districts became filled this provided significantly increased training and planning support for paramilitary and police units at the local level. In practice the new advisory teams spent significant time on non-military capacity building at the district level, but this gave MACV greater insight into local conditions and increased the South Vietnamese government's ability to pacify individual districts.[363]

As described in the chapter overview, the rapid deployment of U.S. forces to South Vietnam stabilized a chaotic situation where RVNAF forces around the country were losing badly to the PLAF and PAVN. As American combat power rapidly expanded, U.S. ground forces – and their South Korean and Australian allies – launched operations to regain the initiative from the North Vietnamese. A significant number of these were large scale offensive operations conducted – or at least coordinated - at the brigade level and higher. Meanwhile, the RVNAF were given the secondary pacification

[363] Collins, 48-49.

mission. South Vietnamese combat units, with limited firepower and mobility for much of the period, were given largely static missions conducted mostly at the small unit level.

The USMC pursues greater partnering efforts in I Corps

In contrast to U.S. Army operations in the southern three CTZs, the US Marines in III Marine Amphibious Force pursued partnered operations with the RVNAF in the 1st Corps Tactical Zone to a much larger degree. Part of this was the nature of III MAF's defensive mission in northern Vietnam, where conducting operations in the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien along the supposed "demilitarized zone" (DMZ) and Laotian border created less of a division between the 'big unit' and pacification missions.[364] Much of this, however, was simply a different approach taken by Walt and successive U.S. commanders in the north who pursued a much more integrated relationship with the RVNAF in their sector.

Soon after arriving in August 1965, U.S. Marines near Da Nang and Phu Bai (south of Hue) established coordination centers with the ARVN 1st and 2d Divisions to deconflict their operations (I Corps commander LTG Thi also wanted to ensure that U.S. forces stayed out of major urban areas such as Da Nang and Hue). They then immediately began joint patrols with 1st and 2d Division and local territorial forces.[365] Later, in November 1965, US Marines in the same area conducted a combined amphibious landing with a Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) battalion, which then expanded to combined

[364] The DMZ constituted the border between North and South, which was supposed to be free of military activity based on the treaty ending the 1st Indochina War. However, the North continuously violated the border with small unit infiltration that gradually increased to much larger units.
[365] Shulimson and Johnson, 31.

search and destroy operations with the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) and two Ranger battalions.[366]

While the USMC battalion near Phu Bai initially found the Popular Forces (PF) in their zones to be "most unreliable military personnel." [367] However, the USMC battalion commander, Lt Col Taylor, recognized their usefulness. PF were soon integrated into his patrols as guides and interpreters and Lt Col Taylor later negotiated with the ARVN 1st Division commander to gain operational control of four local villages.[368]

This was the beginning of III MAF's Combined Action Program (CAP) - integrating Marine Corps squads with local Popular Force platoons. This program went far beyond advising…and even partnering. U.S. Marine noncommissioned officers directly led the mixed units with supervising CAP elements at district and province headquarters. Over the next several years this program was gradually extended throughout the five provinces in I CTZ and eventually 350 hamlets would be guarded with 114 CAP units. Walt assessed the program as a major success, resulting in local PF units pushing out of their fixed fortifications, patrolling in the local areas and improving security.[369]

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[366] Shulimson and Johnson, 46.
[367] Shulimson and Johnson, 23
[368] Bruce C. Allnutt, "Marine Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience, Interim Technical Report, (McLean, Virginia: Human Sciences Research, Inc, December 1969), https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/704499.pdf, 16.
[369] Clarke, 180-181.

Westmoreland, however, opposed expansion of the CAP concept in other CTZs, arguing that it drained the strength of U.S. maneuver battalions, duplicated the role of advisors, and made the PF dependent on American support.[370]

USMC combined operations with the ARVN 1st Division were increased after the Buddhist Crisis was resolved in early 1966 and a strong division commander (Brigadier General Truong) was in place. The leadership change and reduction of turmoil was timely, because a PAVN division level cross-border operation in late June 1966 presented a severe threat to security. From July 7 to August 3d, the 1st Division and an Airborne Task Force participated in Operation Lam Son 289 in support of the U.S. 3d Marine Division. In a month-long series of conventional battles, US and RVNAF forces defeated this attack and caused heavy casualties against the PAVN 324B Division.[371]

This sort of integrated combined arms warfare was on an entirely different scale from that being fought in the south, and produced a much greater level of experience for the RVNAF that were involved. It also reinforced trust in their American partners in the north and led to a long period of partnered combat operations by the 1st Division and its Marine peers that would serve it well in the critical fighting in Hue during the later 1968 Tet Offensive. This greater focus on partnering became the norm in the northern provinces – Army elements such as the 101st Airborne forces that gradually flowed into the I CTZ in the following years pursued the same closely integrated operations with the 1st Division as the Marines, with similarly positive results. Success and effectiveness

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[370] Clarke, 180.
[371] Troung, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 57.

begat more success and effectiveness. The approach to combined operations in the remainder of the country, however, was vastly different.

Gradual increase in cooperation

As discussed earlier, the bulk of U.S. combat efforts after intervention were devoted to independent operations seeking to defeat communist 'main forces', while their RVNAF peers focused on the pacification mission. However, as the general situation began to improve however, MACV leaders began to pursue limited combined operations designed to improve RVNAF effectiveness. Although this wasn't a priority, leaders of both sides did recognize that "Combined Action" or "Buddy System" operations provided useful opportunities where RVNAF forces could observe and emulate the combat standards of paired U.S. units in action alongside them.[372]

In the III Corps Tactical Zone, Operation Fairfax paired off and integrated the three battalions of the RVNAF 5th Ranger Group with three American battalions down to squad level for all of 1967. While U.S. leaders assessed this as a success in improving Ranger tactical performance at the small unit level, the fact that the entire operation was planned and directed by U.S. forces clearly wasn't aiding the Ranger group and battalion leaders and staffs in planning and conducting combat operations on their own. The lesson learned from this was for U.S. and ARVN units to instead operate side by side in close coordination and directly supporting each other to maximize both the emulation of best practices by the South Vietnamese as well as the development of their own leaders.[373]

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[372] *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 8-9.
[373] *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 9.

Elsewhere in III Corps, in January 1967, Operations Cedar Falls paired off several ARVN battalions with the U.S. 173d Airborne Brigade and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Operation Junction City conducted in February 1967 was much larger and paired the ARVN 5th, 18th, and 25th Divisions and elements of the Airborne Division and Marine Brigade with U.S. forces.[374] However, in these operations the RVNAF forces were generally given more secondary missions, such as the establishment of security cordons and holding operations, while American forces had more complex and mobile missions, such as search and destroy operations. These were useful in starting to get RVNAF planning and coordination occurring, but the South Vietnamese weren't being placed in the same level of combat situations as the Americans, making it difficult to truly develop their combat effectiveness through 'on the job training.'

The one major exception were the RVNAF regional and general reserve units. At a regional (ie CTZ) level, Ranger forces found themselves the 'unit of choice' that was used both to support search and destroy pacification missions by RVNAF forces as well as larger operations by U.S. forces. Ranger battalions were frequently used, although their group commands saw less use. On a national level, Airborne forces saw frequent use at both the battalion and the task force (regimental) level. RVNAF Marines also saw more frequent action, although to a lesser degree. The net result of a more frequent operational pace was a greater level of effectiveness at the level (battalion or brigade) in which all of these reserve forces were used, which made them generally stand out from their more static ARVN infantry and armored peer units.

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[374] *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 9.

American-driven, Rather Than Combined Planning Efforts

Although in theory, Americans and South Vietnamese participated in joint campaign planning from the national level on down, in reality Americans did most of the staff work unilaterally and then informed their South Vietnamese counterparts. This occurred at all levels from the strategic down to the regimental level. Due to concerns with the lack of South Vietnamese technical capabilities and Viet Cong penetration of the RVNAF, the two allies maintained separate headquarters, with the Americans stationing liaisons with the South Vietnamese. Information was often withheld from the RVNAF and they were frequently left out of operational planning until the moment of execution.[375]

In pacification operations, the majority of combat operations were executed by lower level units. The combat support assets – artillery, helicopter gunships, tactical air, medical evacuation, air transport, and engineers necessary to accomplish these missions were often American. When they were Vietnamese (such as VNAF airstrikes or ARVN artillery) they were still often directed by American advisors – as was the case with American assets. Because RVNAF field commanders did not control the combat support assets that were required, many did not have a good grasp of the requirements necessary to utilize and integrate these resources. RVNAF commanders would often offer only a few comments to plans drafted by their diligent and highly qualified American advisors

[375] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 351.

and due to the information sharing limitations described above, their staffs were often cut out of the process.[376]

American influence across the RVNAF became much deeper during this period. The vast commitment of American resources and the exposure of all levels of the RVNAF to a military with highly professionalized staff procedures and constantly evolving tactics and techniques that continued to improve was seen by the RVNAF as a highly prestigious institution worthy of emulation. Additionally, leadership turmoil caused by the succession of military governments from 1964 to 1966 meant that very little new guidance was coming from South Vietnamese sources. Although American trainers had long pushed U.S. military manuals and procedures, in 1967 the JGS formally committed in a memorandum to modeling itself around U.S. processes and doctrine until the future development of its own doctrine at some later date. [377]

As discussed in the chapter overview, the entire nature of combined US-RVNAF operations changed throughout the country in response to the Tet Offensive of 1968. Responding to this nationwide general offensive required US and RVNAF to cooperate on level entirely different from that performed by many of them before. This response changed the nature of combined operations for the remainder of the war.

Immediately following the Tet Offensive, U.S. and RVNAF forces took the initiative and launched a series of combined offensive operations. Those few units that had already been involved in regular or intermittent operations with American forces

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[376] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 69-70.
[377] Lung, "Strategy and Tactics," 110; 114.

responded rapidly. However, for many ARVN units the transition from static or short duration small unit operations to large scale offensive operations was a great challenge – they took heavy casualties and were then faced with integrating new and largely untrained recruits. This created a further lack of enthusiasm in some U.S. commanders to partner with less effective RVNAF forces as they sought to rapidly pursue and punish a defeated enemy. Nevertheless, the relationship incurred a new change in strategic direction that endured as the war transitioned to its next phase, Vietnamization.

Exemplar Battle: Battle of Hue during the Tet Offensive (1968)

US Security Forces Committed: **Yes**
Primacy of US Combat Force Mission to: **Independent Operations**
Advisors down to what level: **Battalion Level**

The North Vietnamese general offensive conducted across South Vietnam during the Tet holiday at the end of January 1968 presented the first real test for the RVNAF to demonstrate whether it had made any improvement. The "Tet Offensive" was a shock to the South Vietnamese and American publics. After previously focusing on the border areas, large scale attacks by both main force PLAF and infiltrated PAVN forces now threatened urban areas and bases throughout the country, including the capital in Saigon. Perhaps the greatest North Vietnamese success and psychological shock came

through their seizure and subsequent occupation of large parts of the previously peaceful and largely undefended city of Hue, the former imperial capital.[378]

Faced with a country-wide invasion of South Vietnamese urban areas, RVNAF across the country stood their ground and held against the surprise assaults in numerous separate actions alongside their US counterparts. Hue – site of the most intense fighting – represents a microcosm of this overall campaign. Elements of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division commanded by Brigadier General (BG) Truong withstood the initial assault on the heart of the city. Over the next two weeks, U.S. and RVNAF forces fought largely separate battles to first hold their positions and then regain control of the city in bloody, house to house fighting. Although the intervention of U.S. reinforcements and fire support was necessary for the final push in the heavily fortified citadel, the ability for a combined RVNAF force to effectively conduct a pitched urban battle with only US advisors and limited US air and artillery support represents a significant improvement.

While the challenging fight to retake Hue is generally portrayed in American history books as another in a long line of gritty performances by the U.S. Marine Corps, it is also a sign of ARVN resilience and improving effectiveness as well. Although there is no doubt that the ARVN forces defending Hue were among the more elite units in the RVNAF, their performance is still overall indicative of the gains that had been made in the overall force between the mid-1960s and early 1968 for broadly similar situations were experienced across the country.

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[378] From a South Vietnamese perspective this was by far the greatest shock. From an American perspective, the temporary penetration of a PLAF assault team onto the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon – covered on world-wide television – was an equal or greater shock.

The Situation:

By the middle of 1967, a number of senior North Vietnamese leaders felt that they had successfully moved through the first two stages of revolutionary warfare – organization/base-building and guerilla warfare – and had now entered the third and final stage where a combination of large scale military operations and mass uprisings could secure victory over the South Vietnamese and their American patrons. Planning began for a "General Offensive – General Uprising" which would achieve "decisive victory" in early 1968.[379] The planned offensive would begin with attacks along South Vietnam's western border and the demilitarized border between North and South Vietnam. These operations would draw U.S. and South Vietnamese attention away from the true objective of the General Offensive – a series of attacks throughout South Vietnam's lowlands and urban areas using infiltrated forces, local guerillas, and political cadres to paralyze the South Vietnamese government and military commands while inciting a popular uprising from the general population.[380]

To maximize the overall surprise, shock, and disruption, the urban attacks would occur during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year celebrated in 1968 at the end of January, a traditional period of local cease-fires and general furloughs for the RVNAF.[381] While attacks would take place across the country, the largest efforts were aimed at seizing the national capital in Saigon and the former imperial capital of Hue, a strategic city in the north and symbol of Vietnamese nationalism and culture.[382] While the PLAF forces were

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[379] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 24.
[380] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 27.
[381] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 28.
[382] Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," 2.

concentrated further south for the attack against Saigon, the attack on Hue would be conducted by infiltrated PAVN regiments with local political cadre in support. Three North Vietnamese regiments were designated for the assault of the city itself, with another designated to open a supply line to logistics base areas in nearby mountains to the northwest of the city. Two more regiments would then march to support the attack after breaking off previous operations besieging the American firebase at Khe Sanh to the west.[383]

Hue, the capital of Thua Thien Province in northern South Vietnam, is a city located 7 miles southwest of the South China Sea on both sides of an L-shaped bend of the Perfume River. On the northwest bank of the river, stood the Citadel, a six-square kilometer Vauban-style fortress built in 1802 with massive, 25-30 foot high and 20 foot hick stone walls surrounded by a moat.[384] The Citadel was dominated on its southern end by the kilometer-square former Imperial Palace, surrounded by additional walls and another moat. To the north of a shallow canal winding across the middle of the Citadel lay the modern Tay Loc Airfield. The ARVN 1st Division headquarters occupied still another "mini-fortress," the Mang Ca compound in the northeast corner. Across from the Citadel on the southern side of the river lay the newer and more modern sections of the city known as the "Triangle" housing the MACV Compound and Thua Thien provincial headquarters.[385]

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[383] Villard, 261.
[384] 3rd Marine Division, Command Chronology, Feb 1968, enclosure 1, "The Battle of Hue," Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu, 1; Villard, 388.
[385] Villard, 388-389.

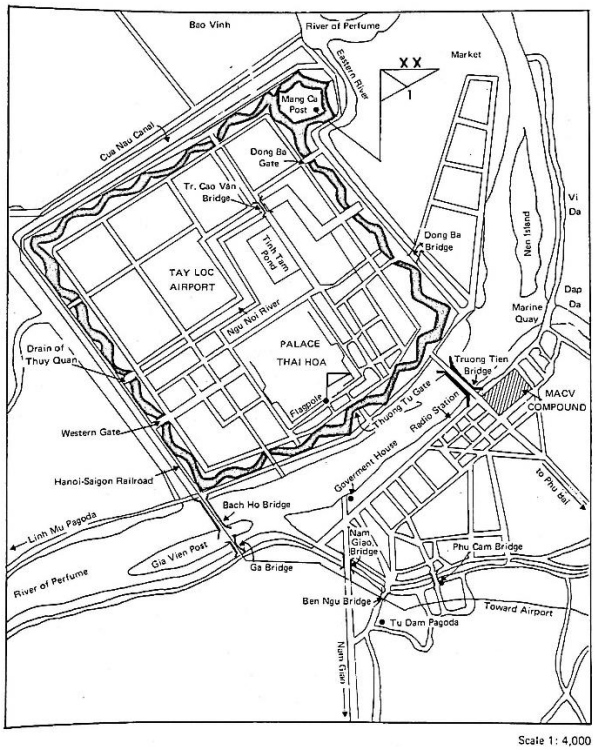

Figure 10: The Citadel in Hue, 1968

(Note the Citadel in the center of the map, with the Mang Na compound in the northern corner, Tay Loc Airfield in the center of the northwest quadrant and the former Imperial Palace in the center.)[386]

Although a large and important city, Hue had never suffered anything other than occasional mortar or terrorist attacks and so had few defenders on a normal basis, much less during the Tet holiday. Other than the South Vietnamese division staff, a small number of support units, and a few American advisors, the only combat power available to ARVN 1st Division commander BG Ngo Quang Truong in his headquarters compound consisted of the division's reconnaissance platoon and the Hac Bao (Black Panther)

[386] Hoang Ngoc Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-1969*, Indochina Monographs. (Washington, D.C: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 77.

company, the division's elite quick reaction force.[387] Across the river in the new city, the MACV compound housed only U.S. and Australian advisory staff and U.S. support elements.[388] Further outside the city a South Vietnamese Airborne battalion and a light tank company provided on call reserve forces and a U.S. Airborne battalion secured the rear area logistical base of the 1st Cavalry Division.[389]

The ARVN 1st Division was the unit historically assigned to defend the northern border and had benefitted from a cooperative relationship with U.S. combat units deployed in the border area. Following the division's participation in the attempted Buddhist insurrection in Hue in 1966, President Thieu had promoted Truong, the airborne officer assigned to end the mutiny, to command it. According to advisors, Truong had subsequently "whipped the rebellious 1st Division into one of South Vietnam's best army units."[390] Truong had earlier been recognized by Norman Schwartzkopf, one of his airborne advisors, as a highly intelligent and driven officer. He rapidly grasped the utility of the American firepower available to him and had worked hard to develop an extremely close working relationship with his peer units. While some of Truong's peers may have seen him as a potential rival, his American advisors and peer U.S. commanders consistently praised Truong publicly, seeing him as an example of professionalism for the RVNAF of the future.[391] To some degree, Truong benefitted from the fact that his superior, I Corps commander LTG Lam, was largely disinterested in the majority of his

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[387] Villard, 389.
[388] George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, (Boulder, Colorado Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999), 29.
[389] Villard, 389.
[390] Clarke, 248.
[391] Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 14.

military duties and allowed his 1st Division commander to run his division effectively, without interference.[392]

Truong's aggressive attitude permeated the 1st Division and was reciprocated by the Americans. A U.S. Army advisor assigned to the 1st Division during the Tet Offensive claimed that even U.S. Marines who "rarely even tolerated their own countrymen in other branches of the service, were generally tolerant towards the ARVN 1st Division. It was the only ARVN unit they would willingly go on maneuvers with."[393] The professionalism and competence of the 1st Division units was soon put to the test and allowed them to withstand the extremely challenging crucible that they would face.

The Plan (host nation and patron)

Although receiving increasing intelligence reports of a coming nationwide offensive aimed at the cities during fall and winter of 1967, U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders and senior intelligence staff were skeptical. This same period had seen increased enemy activity along the DMZ and border areas of the I, II, and III Corps Tactical Zones. Additionally, all previous activity in the cities had consisted only of terrorism, espionage, and political activity and intelligence assessed that the enemy lacked the strength to seize major urban areas. The primary concern of U.S. commanders were the 20,000 estimated enemy forces besieging Khe Sanh. Nevertheless, MACV Commander GEN Westmoreland *was* concerned with the high level of enemy infiltration and ordered US commanders to be ready and alert during the two-day truce for Tet,

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[392] Talmadge, 61.
[393] Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 14.

concerned that the enemy would take advantage of this period to reposition for future operations.[394]

BG Truong was similarly unaware of the impending general offensive. However, he benefited from North Vietnamese difficulties in coordinating the initiation of the attacks across the length of South Vietnam. Although the general offensive was planned to begin on 31 January, some of the attacks began as early as 3 am on January 30, with others not occurring until February 1.[395] As a wave of Tet Offensive began to his south across southern I Corps and II Corps on January 30th, Truong took action with the limited forces available to him. He canceled holiday leave for those elements of his division that hadn't already departed, ordered his 3 regimental commanders (who were at his command post) to rejoin and alert their units and ordered the Regional and Popular Forces units near the city and ordered them on duty that night.[396] He restricted his staff to the Mang Na compound, deployed half the Hac Bao company to guard the Provincial headquarters across the river, and sent his reconnaissance platoon to watch likely enemy approaches 4 kilometers north of Hue. Truong had quickly and proactively emplaced advance warning elements in the several hours he had available, but otherwise could do nothing but await the potential attack coming his way.[397]

Command and Control

The three participating Allied forces in the battle for Hue – U.S. Marines, U.S. Army, and RVNAF essentially operated independently in isolation of each other. In

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[394] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 34-35.
[395] Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-1969*, 78.
[396] Smith, 20.
[397] Villard, 392.

general, there was little support between the various elements and this also facilitated a lack of understanding of the overall situation facing the allies. Rather than prioritizing supporting fires, air and logistics support to the units most in need, these largely simply went to the Americans.

RVNAF I Corps commander LTG Hoang Xuan Lam played a limited role in the beginning of operation, but then BG Truong was largely left to direct the battle on his own. Similarly, senior JGS leaders were focused on stabilizing Saigon and only able to give attention and resources to the critical fight in Hue until much later. Following the initial attack, LTG Lam released an additional airborne battalion (the 2d ABN) just outside Hue from his corps reserve to add to the two already under Truong's control. Lam also met with his US peer, Lt Gen Cushman on the night of February 1st and reached an agreement that ARVN forces would be responsible for operations in the city north of the Perfume River, including most importantly retaking the Citadel, with the Marines on the southern side of the river.[398] Other than that, however, Lam appears to have played little part in the battle, unlike both President Thieu (a former 1st Division Commander) and Vice President Ky who both gave guidance to and received briefings directly from BG Truong.[399]

The activation of MACV Forward headquarters early in the battle created a significant amount of confusion as this new staff and the existing III MAF staff each attempted to give orders to subordinate U.S. ground units. Additionally, this created

[398] Villard, 399, 401.
[399] Smith, 179.

confusion in coordination with MACV and increased rather than decreasing inefficiency and confusion in a complex campaign taking place across the length and breadth of the country. By the time that the 1st Cavalry Division's assistant commander, BG Davis, became the central coordinator for all supporting fires – both U.S. and South Vietnamese - in Hue on February 20, the battle was essentially over.[400] This was a vital need, but established far too late in the battle.

Advisory Relationship

Although deployed at the battalion, regimental and division level, advisors do not appear to have had a significant influence impact upon the battle. The driving force were the South Vietnamese themselves. Many of the RVNAF infantry units involved in the fighting were among the most elite forces in the South Vietnamese military. Additionally, with so many U.S. units simultaneously involved in intense combat, much of the American fire support that advisors could normally have provided for their supported units was not available. Furthermore, South Vietnamese political restrictions initially restricted the use of air strikes within the Citadel. Following the cessation of these restrictions, the fire support coordination role played by U.S. advisors became more critical.

Conduct of the Operation

The Initial North Vietnamese Attack

The North Vietnamese attack on Hue began at 3:40 am on January 31 with 122mm rocket and mortar fire against the city. The 6th PAVN Regiment attacked the

[400] Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," 20, 24.

Citadel, attempting to seize the airfield and 1st ARVN division headquarters while the 4th PAVN Regiment attempted to seize the MACV compound and provincial headquarters across the river to the south. These attacks were supported by three PAVN sapper battalions and a rocket artillery battalion.[401] Over subsequent days, further PAVN reinforcements flowed into the city, and eventually sixteen battalions – the equivalent of two full infantry divisions – would be committed to the city.[402]

Truong's precautions were effective in providing him early warning of the impending attack, but the North Vietnamese attack benefitted from its enormous numerical advantage and local collaborators. From positions on the southwest outskirts of the city, the 1st ARVN Division's reconnaissance platoon company observed several enemy battalions moving towards Hue, radioed their locations, strengths and equipment, and was then withdrawn.[403] As two PAVN battalions approached the gates of the Citadel, PLAF infiltrators inside the fortress killed the ARVN guards from behind and opened the gates, allowing the attackers to swarm inside.[404] The PAVN 800th battalion forward in the dark to seize the airfield, however, it was counterattacked by the Hac Bao, company and elements of an ARVN ordnance company and forced to withdraw.[405] While this was occurring, the PAVN 802d battalion faced a stiff defense by 1st Division staff and support personnel in the Mang Na compound and was also forced to withdraw. When both the 800th and 802d battalions combined to attack the airfield later in daylight, they found it

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[401] Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-1969*, 78; Villard, 392.
[402] Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-1969*, 84.
[403] 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 2; Villard, 392.
[404] Smith, 22.
[405] Smith 24. Andrew Wiest, 2008, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*, New York: New York University Press, 100-101.

abandoned – with the ARVN having withdrawn at 7 am to the more defensible division headquarters. By midday the attack had stalemated. The PAVN were in control of the majority of the Citadel and a small, cobbled together force of ARVN defenders held the Mang Na compound in its northeast corner.[406]

While much more successful than in any other area of South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese attackers in Hue were unable to gain full control of the city. For the next three weeks, the battle for Hue became first a race by both sides to reinforce their forces in the city alongside a steady US-South Vietnamese effort to take the city back block by block. To the south of the river, the provincial headquarters had been seized, but the MACV compound held out against waves of PAVN attackers.[407] Upon consultation with BG Truong, the US Marines agreed to assume responsibility to reinforce and then retake the southern bank of the river and the ARVN assumed responsibility for the north.

The RFNAF Reinforce the Citadel

To rescue his besieged headquarters and then begin to retake the citadel, Truong recalled his 3rd regiment (with its four infantry battalions), the 1st Airborne Task Force (a regimental sized force of three airborne battalions) and the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron on the southern outskirts to march to his aid. As they moved to relieve the Citadel, each of these separate reinforcing elements – the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, the 3d Regiment, and the Airborne Task Force – was intercepted and attacked by the PAVN and they responded with varying degrees of success. [408]

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[406] Smith 26-27.
[407] Villard, 393.
[408] 3d Marine Divison, "The Battle of Hue," 3.

The armored column comprising the twenty-six M41 light tanks and twelve M113 armored personnel carriers of the 7th (minus one troop of M113s attached to the Airborne) was ambushed by anti-tank rockets and heavy machine gun fire immediately upon attempting to make the one mile movement to the Citadel. The squadron commander was killed, twelve armored vehicles were destroyed and several tanks were captured intact (and later used against US Marines) and the attack was turned back.[409] The remainder of these forces would not be a factor in the rest of the battle.

As they attempted to move southeast to the citadel on the morning of January 31st, the 7th Airborne Battalion and 3d troop of the 7th Cavalry (3-7 Cav) and its 12 M113s were stopped by the 806th PAVN BN, which was entrenched in a cemetery. Later in the afternoon, the attack was joined by the 2d Airborne Battalion, which maneuvered to hit the PAVN defenders on the flank. Although they were unable to completely dislodge the 806th from the cemetery during the day, the North Vietnamese pulled back into the Citadel later that night. After a day and a half of hard fighting, elements of the Hac Bao company guided the Airborne Task force into the Mang Na compound around noon on February 1st.[410]

Truong Counterattacks

BG Truong counterattacked to regain the Tai Loc Airfield immediately upon being reinforced. The 2d and 7th Airborne battalions, the remaining M113s of 3-7 Cav, and elements of the Hac Bao company caught the PAVN defenders off guard, seized the

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[409] Lung,*The General Offensives of 1968-1969*, 79-80; Smith, 27.
[410] Villard, 399.

airfield, and significantly expanded the division's perimeter into the northwestern portions of the Citadel. By the end of February 1st, they were joined by the 4th battalion of the 1st Division's 3d Regiment, which had been transported to the Citadel by boats of the South Vietnamese Navy after its way was blocked by land.[411]

While US Marines attempted to clear the southern bank of the river and the US Army's 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division to the west of Hue fought to cut enemy supply lines and restore its own, the ARVN 1st Division slowly attempted to expand its perimeter.[412] Over the course of Feb 2d, ARVN forces regained control of the remainder of the airfield and much of the northwestern corner while being reinforced by the 9th Airborne Battalion, flown into the Citadel by US helicopters. Over the course of the next four days, the ARVN forces continued to make slow progress against heavily dug-in defenders whose numbers matched or possibly exceed that of the 1st Division forces in the Citadel.[413] The PAVN continued to reinforce the Citadel each night and a battalion-sized counterattack pushed the ARVN back to the airfield on February 6th.[414]

Outside the Citadel, the remaining three battalions of the Third Regiment had fought their way through the outskirts of the city from the west and reached the southwestern corner of the Citadel by February 1st.[415] However, lacking heavy weapons or fire support they were unable to force their way through the high walls and heavily defended gates at the southern entrances of the fortress complex and would remain there

[411] 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 5.
[412] Villard, 400, 412.
[413] Smith 123.
[414] Villard, 414.
[415] Smith, 123.

stymied by the PAVN defenders for the next six days.[416] Finally, on February 7th, US Navy landing craft transported them around the Citadel and they were able to enter the complex at the Mang Na compound. Additionally, a new ARVN armored cavalry troop, 2-7 Cavalry, arrived after participating in a week of heavy fighting at Quang Tri in the north and replaced the battered 3-7 Cavalry in securing the airfield.[417]

Despite these critically needed reinforcements, the ARVN forces were severely depleted and exhausted. The combined remaining strength of the three airborne battalions together was less than one battalion at the beginning of the engagement. The rest of the combat units – including the new units from the 3d Regiment which had also previously been in combat – were all below fifty percent strength. Not only had they suffered heavy casualties, but all were still missing soldiers from Tet Leave.[418] Finally, the ARVN units lacked the heavy weapons such as mortars or recoilless rifles necessary to dig the PAVN defenders out of the buildings in the old city surrounding the Imperial Palace.[419]

The heavy casualties to the airborne task force – part of the country's strategic reserve force – was particularly concerning to senior South Vietnamese military and political leaders and so the decision was made to withdraw the airborne and replace them with three battalions of Vietnamese marines.[420] Advance elements of these marines, who had been fighting in Saigon and the Mekong Delta, had begun arriving around February

[416] Villard, 399, 414.
[417] 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 6.
[418] Smith, 125.
[419] Villard, 415.
[420] Smith, 127.

8. However, the Vietnamese Marine task force commander refused to enter the Citadel until his entire force had arrived in the area.[421]

U.S. Marine Intervention and a Slow Final Advance

Concerned with his ability to effectively retake the Citadel, BG Truong requested assistance from the Americans on February 10th, the same day that Hue's south bank was declared officially secure.[422] With prodding from the GEN Westmoreland, the Marines agreed to support Truong, but US leaders failed to grasp the immensity of the challenge still remaining. A single USMC battalion and a platoon of 5 supporting tanks were deemed sufficient to defeat the "approximately three [enemy] companies" that Westmoreland cabled Washington were remaining in the Citadel.[423] As the USMC's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (1/5 Marines) began to flow in by landing craft on February 11th and 12th, the Airborne Task Force was withdrawn and 1st and 5th Vietnamese Marine battalions, along with six 105mm howitzers, arrived to replace them.[424]

Unfortunately, failure in coordination between the ARVN units, the Vietnamese Marines, and the USMC elements caused significant casualties on the first day of the renewed attack on Feb 13th. Although it would work in a designated sector alongside BG Truong's forces, 1/5 Marines remained under the operational control of its parent USMC regiment.[425] Late on the previous night, Major Thompson, the 1/5 battalion commander, and BG Truong had agreed that the US marines would assume the sector previously

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[421] Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," 15.
[422] Smith, 129, 132.
[423] Smith, 129. American commanders were unaware of the size of the PAVN opposition they were fighting throughout the battle.
[424] 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 7.
[425] Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," 15.

occupied by the Airborne Task Force and attack towards the southeastern corner of the citadel the next morning. Unfortunately, Maj Thompson either was not told or failed to understand that the Airborne Task Force had withdrawn earlier on the 12th. As the advance elements of 1/5 moved through terrain that they thought was secure on the morning of the 13th they ran straight into an equal sized force of advancing PAVN and suffered heavy casualties within minutes. The USMC battalion only advanced a block that first day.[426]

To Thompson's flank, the two Vietnamese marine battalions that were supposed to have been simultaneously attacking towards the southwestern corner of the Citadel made no progress as they dealt with a PAVN spoiling attack at the airfield to their rear and heavily entrenched defenders to their front. The North Vietnamese retained control of the two western gates of the Citadel and reinforcements continued to flow into the compound.[427]

US commanders voiced strong concern with a perceived general lethargy and lack of aggressiveness of the Vietnamese marines, with GEN Abrams "recommend[ing] to the ARVN Joint General Staff that they be replaced with an ARVN force that would fight, not delay."[428] However, the RVNAF forces in the west of the Citadel lacked the tanks and heavy weapons such as recoilless rifles that the Marines were using to such great effect and were subject to much greater pressure from reinforcing PAVN elements. [429]

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[426] Villard, 420, 422.
[427] 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 8; Wiest, 114.
[428] Smith, 154-155.
[429] Wiest, 113; Villard, 422.

After the US Marines of 1/5 again failed to make any significant progress in moving forward on Feb 14th, the initial South Vietnamese government restraints on the rules of engagement for the use of heavy artillery and airpower in support of operations inside the Citadel were subsequently lifted (except for attacks against the palace itself, which were finally cleared on February 23d). Supported by mortars, tanks, recoilless rifles, Ontos fire support vehicles, artillery support, naval gunfire, air support (benefitting from improved weather), and the occasional use of tear gas, 1-5 recovered from the shock of their first days of fighting and began grinding forward block by block in heavy fighting.[430] The battalion was exhausted after two days of further operations and halted on Feb 17th for three days to reorganize and receive replacements. When the Hac Bao company was ordered by BG Truong to provide assistance to the US marines near the Imperial Palace, the offer was refused – Thompson maintained that he had been ordered "to maintain complete control of his area of operations."[431]

After defeating the PAVN counterattack, the RVNAF forces in the west of the Citadel began their own slow advance against a well-fortified and motivated PAVN defense. In two days the Marines had pushed forward only 400 meters to their front, alongside the northwest edge of the palace. [432] However, the 1st Division's 3d Regiment, Hac Bao company and 2-7 Cav to their rear were able to clear the rest of the Citadel behind them, freeing up more forces for forward movement.[433] ARVN commander and

[430] Villard, 422-423. Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-1969*, 83.
[431] Smith, 155.
[432] Villard, 422.
[433] Wiest, 114.

their advisors, were able to increasingly receive combined air support from the VNAF, USMC Air, and US Air Force and use this to deadly effect against the PAVN.[434]

Eventually, the weight of forces and firepower began to shift the advantage towards the RVNAF and Marines. With the arrival of a third Marine battalion, Truong was now able to throw three Marine battalions, his 3d regiment and the Hac Bao company – all now supported by airstrikes and artillery – against the enemy and break through their southwestern defenses on February 19.[435] A night attack by the USMC battalion on February 20 finally succeeded in breaking through the PAVN defenses in the southeast.[436] On February 21st, with the US Army's 1st Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade advancing eastward towards the city, the division's Assistant Division Commander, BG Davis, established a headquarters co-located with BG Truong in the Mang Na compound responsible for coordinating all fire support in the Citadel.[437]

On Feb 23d, with the PAVN command and control sites and resupply routes severed by the 1st Cavalry Division's advances outside the city and two newly committed Ranger battalions now clearing the outskirts of the Citadel, the PAVN commander was allowed by his superiors to withdraw. Soon only remnants remained in the Citadel. The honor of retaking the final historic sites in the Imperial Palace was given to the ARVN. At 5 am on Feb 24th, the 2d BN, 3rd ARVN Regt seized the undefended flagpole area and

[434] 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 8.
[435] 3d Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 8; Wiest, 115.
[436] Villard, 423.
[437] Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," 20.

re-raised the South Vietnamese flag while the Hac Bao company swept the Palace for enemy resistance. By 6 pm, all effective resistance in the Citadel was over.[438]

Analysis

While the overall RVNAF performance in the battle of Hue represents a significant improvement over their earlier performance at Ap Bac and similar battles under the previous Diem regime, this improvement was not uniform and we can observe significant variation. Both the ARVN 1st Division, the core element in this battle, and the Airborne Task Force performed admirably in extremely challenging urban operations, with the 1st Division receiving the U.S. Presidential Unit Citation.[439] Moreover, since the U.S. leadership and their subordinate forces were distracted by the battles of their own units for much of this battle, BG Truong was essentially on his own for much of the fight – particularly the desperate early phases – and demonstrated the ability to fight effectively in independent South-Vietnamese operations. However, the battle also illustrated shortfalls in the overall RVNAF effort, both with individual components (Armor and Marines) and with overall coordination between different types of RVNAF forces.

Although it eventually exhausted itself in bloody house to house fighting, the ARVN 1st Division performed well. BG Truong and his headquarters were able to maintain order in an extremely chaotic situation. As new units became available, Truong

[438] 3d Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 8-9; Smith, 163; Shulimson, "The Battle for Hue," 20-22.
[439] Wiest, 121.

integrated them into a coherent whole and attacked aggressively to expand his perimeter. This includes not only his own divisional units, but Airborne and later Marine forces.

Each of the 1st Division's subordinate units also performed well. The three regiments moved rapidly back to the Citadel, fighting their way through heavy opposition to get there, and then went straight into combat upon arrival. The division's elite reconnaissance company was critical to the early survival of the division headquarters and fought well throughout the battle. We can assess them as possessing basic proficiency as there was little opportunity for combined arms action.

The Airborne Task force not only performed its own assigned missions, but effectively worked well with its attached mechanized troop. We can assess them as possessing combined/joint proficiency.

It is difficult to evaluate BG Truong's combined arms effectiveness in this battle. The Airborne Task Force was integrated seamlessly with the 1st Division forces. While the VNMC were later integrated into the plan, they performed less aggressively, although part of this is due to the extremely challenging task which they were handed (more on this below). Truong had little of his own artillery at his disposal and was reliant on an RVNAF fire support system managed largely by US advisers calling in American air and artillery support.[440] For this particular battle where US forces were decisively engaged to

[440] Although there is at least one recorded example of the ARVN commander of the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment calling in accurate and successful airstrikes against the PAVN as he maneuvered his battalion around the outskirts of the Citadel and linked up with VNN patrol boats to gain access to the rest of his division. Detailed in - 3rd Marine Division, "The Battle of Hue," 4. 1st Division units from at least 1968 onward are consistently reported calling in their own air strikes. This is likely due to having served alongside U.S. forces in combined operations for an extensive period as well as more effective commanders influenced by BG Truong.

the south and west, ARVN forces were at the bottom of the queue of the American-run fire support system and thus had little opportunity to demonstrate any ability to integrate fire support – either effectively or ineffectively. [441]

When the USMC battalion entered the battle on February 13th, they were able to receive much more support. Even the Americans, however, had difficulty getting air support in the Citadel due to cultural sensitivities and political constraints, highlighting the overall complexity of this battle. The South Vietnamese government prevented bombing runs against the culturally important imperial palace and surrounding areas until Feb 16th, and even after the ban was lifted, strikes against the compound itself did not actually occur until Feb 23d, only one day before the end of enemy resistance. [442] Regardless, the fire control system had not been designed to support independent RVNAF operations, clearly hampering Truong's operations. Overall, we are unable to assess the 1st Division headquarters higher than basic proficiency, simply from lack of available data.

It is more difficult to evaluate the performance of the three VNMC battalions. Up until now, the Marines were generally used to working with the USMC and not with their own forces. Additionally, these units had already participated in combat operations to the south before being ordered to reinforce Hue. Upon arriving they were not only assigned the task of conducting an urban assault in extremely difficult terrain and with limited supporting assets, they also had to absorb a simultaneous PAVN counterattack against the

[441] Smith, 141.
[442] Smith 145, 163.

1st Divisions flank, making the RVNAF situation chaotic. The Marines only advanced slowly during the operation. They appear to be at a level of basic proficiency and did not seem to have integrated well under 1st Division control.

While the single M113 troop assigned to the Airborne task force fought well and in an integrated fashion with its infantry counterparts, the majority of the South Vietnamese armored forces in the battle performed poorly. The 7th Armored Cavalry squadron elements moving south to reinforce the Citadel, particularly the tanks, would have been crucial in providing the critically needed heavy firepower which the 1st Division later lacked to enable its advance in house to house fighting. Instead, they simply raced right down the road into an ambush which caused such intense damage that the battalion sized element was withdrawn for the remainder of the battle. Some tank crewmen even abandoned their operable vehicles and the North Vietnamese later used them. Reacting to anti-armor ambushes is a normal skill required for armor and cavalry. However, South Vietnamese armor had seen much less use than their infantry peers until now in the conflict. In this case their lack of training and experience showed and we can thus rate the 7th Armored Cavalry as Lacking Basic Proficiency.

Overall, the performance of the RVNAF units during the battle of Hue was a clear result of the value of leadership and the benefits of experience gained through combined arms operations partnered with the Americans. The 1st Division and Airborne clearly demonstrated their proficiency in complex and demanding urban warfare. Systemic command and control issues such as the lack of a fire control system to support independent RVNAF operations and weaknesses in the ability of South Vietnamese

Marines to integrate under ARVN command as well as poor armored proficiency from less experienced units were significant shortfalls that would have to be rectified if the South Vietnamese were to be capable of their own independent operations.

In Talmadge's explanation of 1st Division effectiveness, she suggests that the Thieu regime allowed this single division to adopt more effective practices such as promoting for merit and a greater focus on training because of three factors. First, the division's proximity to the North Vietnamese border required a special exception to be made for this unit because its location as the northernmost ARVN force and the potential for conventional invasion from the north. Second, she argues that after the Buddhist crisis, the coup threat from the north was removed and so this unit – far from the capital – could be left to be more effective since it did not represent a likely coup threat to Saigon. The U.S. presence in South Vietnam provided protection from the North and so the rest of the RVNAF was more heavily politicized.[443]

However, while there is certainly explanatory value in this explanation, it still seems unsatisfactory explanation for explaining what was going on. Certainly, Talmadge's suggestion that states are not blind to conventional threats, but that they simply prioritize coup threats above them has value. But this is not all of the story and the U.S. was not simply a shield that had no agency of its own.

The Buddhist crisis represented a clear threat to the Thieu/Ky government. By placing the LTG Lam as 1st Corps commander, the central government gained a commander who was loyal and passive and thus clearly not a military threat to the

[443] Talmadge, 61.

regime. By placing Truong in 1st Division they gained both a competent officer (as Talmadge correctly asserts), but also an officer who would further develop his own skills and his unit's effectiveness through the very different approaches of U.S. units in the north. Truong's American peers saw him as a competent peer. He was certainly a standout officer, but not the only competent commander in the RVNAF. Truong and the 1st Division benefitted because U.S. commanders in the north pursued a much more comprehensive and long running partnership than they did anywhere in South Vietnam. Coup proofing was still a heavy factor during this period, but U.S. commanders consistently praised Truong to his superiors and this was certainly to his advantage as well.

The result was an organization and a leader who benefitted from a much closer working relationship with the American military and which absorbed much more of its more professional practices and became more effective. But the 1st Division was not the only unit which benefitted from such a partnership. The Airborne and Ranger battalions were also units which constantly worked alongside American units in sharp contrast to the average RVNAF element. As with the 1st Division - a continuous exposure to a much higher tempo of offensive operations allowed them to develop their proficiency on the battlefield as well as adopting the practices of their American peer forces to which they received a much greater exposure.

Assessment – Period II: U.S. Intervention

During this middle period of the war, the U.S. pursued a strategy that it thought would force North Vietnam to end the war. A future where South Vietnam would have to fight on its own was not even imagined, which shaped the way in which the U.S. directed its efforts. The most significant change in this period was the commitment of patron state combat forces. The deployment of U.S. ground forces almost certainly saved South Vietnam from total defeat in 1965. However the nature of America's largely unilateral efforts to win the war by defeating the PAVN and PLAF in a war of attrition had second and third order impacts that proved damaging to RVNAF organizational practices in a number of unforeseen ways.

The extensive commitment of U.S. assets gave the U.S. an extreme level of influence over the South Vietnamese government. In general, however, the U.S. chose not to use this influence to force the South Vietnamese to remake the RVNAF as an institution and instead chose to slowly mold their organizational practices without major political confrontation. Despite this, MACV expended massive efforts to expand, train and later begin to equip the RVNAF as a competent security force.

The generally static nature of the RVNAF's pacification mission led to a focus on routine operations by lower level tactical units. Alongside this, many RVNAF units at the regimental level and above experienced a degree of atrophy in their command and control processes to multiple units in the field. A vast apparatus for initial entry training was created, although the RVNAF elements responsible for executing this training largely emphasized form over function, to the detriment of individual knowledge of basic

tasks. Routine training and exercises for formed units continued to be neglected and thus the impact of advisors and experience gained through operations continued to have the most significant impact. MACV worked with the RVNAF to institutionalize a number of promotion systems and processes that would make a long term generational impact upon merit-based promotions, but this had little impact upon leaders at the senior level. Over time the creation of a civilian government reduced the political maneuvering of senior commanders. However, the pacification mission placed little requirements on most of them to develop and maintain all the numerous processes and systems necessary for their staffs to managing units in combat and integrate fires from artillery, naval gunfire or airpower.

Long exposure to US advisory presence and an operational role at the battalion and below tactical level in pacification operations did lead to a modest increase in overall effectiveness across the RVNAF. In contrast to the bulk of the force – a few elite units such as the Rangers and Airborne battalion and the entire 1st Division did pursue a much higher operational tempo and were involved in combined operations with their American peers with a much higher frequency. In the case of the 1st Division the experience in controlling its forces led to command and control improvements that had largely atrophied in most other divisional and regimental sized elements of the RVNAF. This led to an improved security force effectiveness for the Ranger and Airborne battalions and for the 1st Division as a whole.

The Tet offensive proved that RVNAF units as a whole were now capable of standing and defending at the small unit level, with the 1st Division as a larger

organization that stood as an additional outlier able to coordinate its units and conduct offensive operations effectively. Above this level, much of the RVNAF structure had not been given the opportunity for coordinating large scale operations since early 1965 and thus could be assumed have significant shortfalls due to atrophy and be approaching ineffectiveness. Even for the more advanced units, expanding beyond basic proficiency into combined and joint operations would require greater experience and the use of command and control systems (ie fire control) that were almost completely run by Americans.

As discussed in the assessment of the 1968 Battle for Hue, there is no arguing with Talmadge's assertion that severe threat is likely to have at least some impact upon government decision-making, even in a heavily coup-proofed military. But the existence of the threat was not the precipitator of South Vietnamese action. While this provided an opening, it was the intervention of GEN Westmoreland that produced action by President Thieu to make major changes by replacing corps and provincial leaders with more competent officers.

However, the housecleaning brought about by Tet was incomplete and needed to be a more common occurrence. While Tet clearly demonstrated weaknesses in the II and IV corps commanders, the excellent performance of 1st Division Commander BG Truong and 2d Division Commander Colonel Toan masked the weakness of their 1st Corps commander, the passive and ineffective LTG Lam.[444] This weakness would later become alarmingly clear in 1971 and 1972 when the Lam's ineffective leadership and I Corps'

[444] Villard, 442.

inability to command and control multiple units in combat proved devastating for critical South Vietnamese operations.

This was an unfortunate direct result of the decision to relegate the RVNAF to the Pacification mission. GEN(ret) Maxwell Taylor, a former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and Ambassador to South Vietnam, had correctly foreseen in 1965 that not giving the RVNAF major combat responsibilities to develop as a fighting force would lead to command and control and effectiveness shortfalls in the long run. Most of the RVNAF was not tested until three years later at Tet, during which the ability to command large scale forces in combat atrophied.

Assigning the RVNAF the responsibility for major combat operations would have allowed more such opportunities to highlight shortfalls within the RVNAF leadership. This in turn would have given MACV more opportunities to push for necessary change. Additionally, giving the RVNAF responsibility for grappling with a determined and capable enemy would have forced them into much greater cooperation with the Americans. While the fully integrated command structure that MACV had pushed for in 1965 might not have been possible, the need to win on the battlefield would almost certainly have led to a much greater partnership then what largely developed through much of 1965-1968, which was largely a story of two militaries pursuing two different missions in different areas of South Vietnam.

We can essentially say that during this period the dynamic of capability substitution was essentially extrapolated on a nationwide level. In the Advisory period, the South Vietnamese had relied on American helicopters and fixed wing airpower to

provide fire support and rapid maneuver. During this period this remained the same for the U.S. – advisors were the key to providing all of these critical capabilities. Those few units which were most involved in combined operations with American units did gain a greater level proficiency in their use, but still remained reliant on Americans for their employment. Advisors at all levels also performed much of the planning resulting in the atrophy of these necessary capabilities as well. On a national level, the U.S. combat forces deployed to South Vietnam essentially did the same thing. U.S. forces took the fight to the enemy and South Vietnam became heavily dependent on their American shield to defeat PAVN and PLAF main force units and for providing the critical underpinnings of the entire security effort.

Some of this capability substitution was clearly necessary. The intervention of U.S. combat forces in 1965 was critically needed and without this South Vietnam would likely have collapsed under the weight of the "invasion" of PAVN forces that had been added alongside the PLAF. Some sort of "breathing space" was clearly necessary to recover. But some U.S. leaders clearly recognized the need to get the conventional forces of the RVNAF back in the fight as soon as possible and the failure to do this created by the division of responsibilities was devastating.

There is one example of capability substitution that can be viewed as extremely successful – the CORDs-run Phoenix Program. This highly successful program relied on the U.S. to achieve the high degree of coordination among GVN and U.S. intelligence and security elements that created a devastating impact on the VCI allowed other growing and (eventually) more truly GVN-run resulting improvements to take over. By

1971, the only really significant threat to South Vietnam was a conventional one – the threat of North Vietnamese invasion. In this case, the U.S. efforts created what Chapter 2 describes as the level of joint-interagency effectiveness in population security necessary to defeat an insurgency. It can be argued that the population security threat which remained after 1971 was a much smaller one and which could be met by the lower level degree of overall security force effectiveness which the GVN security forces as a whole could maintain on their own.

Another observation that we can make from this period is that the ability of a patron state to influence command and control of a client state is directly impacted by the relative effectiveness of the patron's own command and control apparatus. If patron efforts are disjointed, then its ability to influence the organizational practices of its client is reduced. The creation of CORDS in 1967 was a major improvement synchronizing civilian and military assistance efforts to the pacification effort. This focused assistance and led to the improvement of the territorial forces that constituted almost half of the total RVNAF force structure and which had previously largely been a non-factor in security efforts (outside of anomalies such as the III MAF Combined Action Program which were very successful). It also led to the highly successful Phoenix program which integrated South Vietnamese and U.S. intelligence and police efforts and greatly improved the provision of population security by reducing the leadership infrastructure of the PLAF at

the local level.[445] Unfortunately, these gains were not matched with the same degree of improvement in RVNAF conventional forces.

The RVNAF did improve between 1965 and 1968. However, war is a dyadic relationship between two sides. In this case the RVNAF did not improve to the degree that was necessary to combat their opponents. The RVNAF would later make great strides during Vietnamization when making them a force capable of independent combat operations became a priority. However, this process was rushed and came as U.S. resources were rapidly declining. The decision not to start this process earlier when U.S. influence was greatest had lasting impacts.

Evidence of other potential variables?

As in Chapter 3, there is little support for the warrior culture argument in this period. The overall ethnic and cultural makeup of the PLAF and the RVNAF remained the same. It might be argued that the population of North Vietnam, with a slightly different historical legacy, might have more of a warrior culture than that of the south, but we do not see a change in North Vietnamese effectiveness in this chapter. Instead, we see the oppositive – overall, the RVNAF improved, as shown by their improved performance when defending across the nation during Tet. Additionally, we see variation *within* different South Vietnamese units, which would suggest that there are other much

[445] Between the increasingly successful targeting efforts of the Phoenix program and the activation and subsequent large casualties incurred by National Liberation Front (the political arm of the PLAF) cadres during the TET offensive, the PLAF was virtually destroyed as an organization by the end of 1968.

more important variables involved in determining security force effectiveness in this case.

Chapter 3 showed that a small issue impacting effectiveness was the different patron state cultures of the French versus the Americans. By 1965, the impact of the French was rapidly receding. With the American intervention in South Vietnam, the influence of U.S. military culture became pervasive throughout the RVNAF, which over time began to increasingly look and act like their American peers in terms of dress, crew cut hairstyles, terminology, and overall conduct. However, this appears much more likely to be the influence of 'emulation' one of the primary mechanisms working behind the variable 'commitment of combat forces'. The more exposure to the practices of partnered patron forces, the greater chance this has of rubbing off on the client and influencing organizational practices towards the more professional and effective practices of the patron. Thus, rather than providing another explanation, this supports the argument for the primary independent variables being examined in this study.

Talmadge's threat-based model of politicization suggests that the higher level of effectiveness of the 1st Division was due to the unit's operating distance along the North Vietnamese border which made it less of a coup threat as well as a unit that demanded less coup proofing because of its role in preventing PAVN invasion. These are both likely true to some degree. However, this chapter has provided significant evidence of other factors at play. First, the division was an active participant in disobedience during the Buddhist rebellion, necessitating leadership change. This also led to the eventual selection of the more pliable Lam as I Corps Commander – but only after the Thieu

regime had placed a number of other alternatives as corps commander before him. Most importantly, Talmadge's argument leaves out what seems to be a major factor in the unit's effectiveness – the very close and active partnership of U.S. forces in the north. The 1st division benefitted from years of close coordination and partnered combat operations with USMC forces in I Corps that was different from all other ARVN divisions and only equaled by the Airborne, Rangers, and some Marine units.

CHAPTER FIVE: SOUTH VIETNAM PERIOD III – VIETNAMIZATION (MID 1968-1973)

Variable Analysis:

US Combat Forces Committed: **Yes**
Primacy of US Military Force Mission to: **Partnering**
Advisors down to what level: **Initially down to the battalion level, then rapidly decreasing from 1972 onward**
Organizational Intervention in Training: **Yes**
Organizational Intervention in Command and Control: **Limited**
Organizational Intervention in Promotions/Advancement: **Some, with significant key interventions in 1972**
Exemplar Battles: **1) *Cambodian Incursion – Operation Toan Thang 42* (1970)**
2) *Operation Lam Son 719 (1971)*
3) *I Corps in Quang Tri Province during the Easter Offensive* (1972)

Although the Tet offensive broke the back of the PLAF and proved a severe setback for the PAVN, negative press coverage in the U.S. caused a tremendous decrease in support for an already unpopular war. From the middle of 1968 onwards, the U.S. policy in Vietnam was to seek a way to extricate itself from the war by reaching a peace agreement and rapidly handing over operations to the South Vietnamese.

The first major change for the U.S. during this period was the transition to a new MACV Commander in July 1968 who brought a very different approach to the war – GEN Creighton Abrams. Rather than continuing his predecessor's strategy seeking to wear the enemy down through a continuing war of attrition, Abrams instead sought to win the war through a focus on population security. The large scale search and destroy

operations that had typified Westmoreland's approach gave way to a new focus on numerous smaller operations seeking to find the enemy, seize their supplies, and interdict their movements towards populated areas.[446] *Previously, population security, or pacification as it was known, had been the responsibility of the RVNAF. With American forces now focusing increasingly on the more populated areas came the greater opportunity for more frequent interactions and combined operations with their South Vietnamese partners.*

The second and more momentous change was a new U.S. administration focused on ending the war in Vietnam. The new Nixon administration's strategy for Indochina sought to achieve peace through negotiations, while strengthening the RVNAF and disengaging the U.S. from the war.[447] *A cornerstone of this effort was the administration's policy of "Vietnamization" which accelerated efforts to strengthen the RVNAF through modernization and development while gradually withdrawing combat forces and hand over responsibility to the RVNAF. The U.S. focus on advisors and increasing the institutional capacity of the RVNAF surged for several years and then steadily decreased until all US military forces were withdrawn from Vietnam following the Paris Peace Accords in 1973.*

Overview

Immediately upon GEN Abrams taking command in July 1968, and even prior to the announcement of Vietnamization by the Nixon administration, MACV's strategy

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[446] Sorley, Lewis. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories And Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc. 1999), 17, 21.
[447] Nguyen Duy Hinh, "Vietnamization and the Ceasefire," (1980),In Sorley, Lewis (ed) *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2010), 743-744.

changed from seeking to win a war of attrition to securing control of the population of South Vietnam. Rather than one war of "big battalions" and a separate struggle for pacification, Abrams envisioned a "one war" approach. Such a new approach inherently involved much greater coordination with the RNVAF and this was not lost on Abrams. As he explained to the visiting U.S. Pacific Command commander Admiral McCain, Abram's one war concept involved "equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of RVNAF, and pacification – all of which are interrelated so that the better we do in one, the more our chance of progress in the others".[448]

Within a year, Abrams' new strategy was soon followed by a change in presidential policy from the new Nixon administration. During a Midway Island conference with President Thieu, President Nixon announced his new policy of Vietnamization on June 9, 1969.[449] Aimed at achieving a dual peace on both the battlefield and the negotiating table, Vietnamization was envisioned as three simultaneous processes. First, ground operations would transition to the RVNAF while the U.S. still maintained air, naval and logistics support. Second, combat support capabilities such as artillery, air and other support responsibilities would be increased and developed to enable RVNAF self-reliance. It was acknowledged that this second process would take more time than the first and that U.S. forces would retain certain support and training requirements even after combat forces had been withdrawn. Finally, the

[448] Sorley, 17-18
[449] Hinh, "Vietnamization." 743.

American military presence would reduce and transition to an advisory role until RVNAF strength had grown to the extent that such support was no longer necessary.[450]

Initially, the buildup of U.S. forces had still continued under Abrams, ultimately reaching 543,000 personnel by the spring of 1969.[451] However, with the announcement of Vietnamization, the new administration immediately began a rapid series of troop withdrawals with a pace that shocked their RVNAF allies. MACV leaders had known for some time that a withdrawal was likely and had developed stringent evaluation criteria for a measured withdrawal that would ultimately leave behind a "residual force" of more than 100,000 U.S. personnel.[452] GEN Abrams told his superiors in 1969, that his strategy was not fully implemented and that "any significant reduction in current [U.S.] force levels will result in a significant decrease in combat capability".[453] Nevertheless, the political decision was made. Once the withdrawals began, they developed a momentum of their own driven by domestic political pressure rather than MACV evaluation criteria and the residual force concept was ultimately abandoned[454]

In August, 25,000 U.S. troops were withdrawn, followed by 40,000 more in December 1969.[455] By the end of 1970, more than three of the nine U.S. ground divisions had been withdrawn. By May 1971, a U.S. force of 284,000 remained - seventy percent of the combat maneuver battalions had been withdrawn and American combat air sorties were half of what they had been in 1968. By the end of 1971, only 184,000 U.S.

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[450] Hinh, "Vietnamization." 746-747.
[451] Sorley, 1.
[452] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 145.
[453] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 147.
[454] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 153.
[455] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 148.

forces remained and all ground offensive operations were being conducted by the RVNAF.[456]

Although the reductions focused at first on combat forces, after two years the advisory structure was reduced as well. Over the course of 1972, advisors were gradually withdrawn from the battalion level and then reduced at the regimental and divisional levels – first from regular ARVN forces and then from the Airborne, Rangers and Marines. By the end of 1972, there were less American advisors than in 1962, a decade earlier. Within fourteen months – three and a half years after the announcement of Vietnamization, there were none.[457]

From late 1968 onward, all operations were now combined (overwhelming U.S) with the RVNAF or in some cases solely conducted by the RVNAF, until 1972 when all offensive ground operations were exclusively conducted by the RVNAF. The transition to Vietnamese control benefitted from greatly reduced enemy activity. As detailed in the last chapter, the PAVN had suffered heavily in the Tet offensive and the subsequent back and forth of North Vietnamese offensives and U.S. and RVNAF counteroffensives.[458] Taking advantage of this, combined Allied operations in 1979 largely drove communist forces from their base areas in South Vietnam and across the national boundaries.[459]

In 1970, the Nixon administration took advantage of a coup in Cambodia and departed from the policies of its predecessors by finally allowing the cross-border

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[456] Hinh, "Vietnamization." 748-750.
[457] Hinh, "Vietnamization." 750.
[458] Hinh, "Vietnamization." 749.
[459] Nguyen Duy Hinh, 1979. *Lam Son 719*, Indochina Monographs Series, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 4.

operations into communist base areas in eastern Cambodia and Southeastern Laos which MACV and JGS commanders had long sought. U.S. forces had a narrow window of opportunity to accomplish these missions while they still had the necessary combat power. With U.S. forces redeploying and northern I Corps, northern II Corps, and all of IV Corps in late 1969 and 1970, RVNAF units had to expand their operational areas to cover evacuated U.S. zones as well, relying on the RF and PF to backfill secured areas.[460]

The period from 1970 onward saw the RVNAF engaged in heavy conventional fighting with the PAVN, both within South Vietnam and in cross-border incursions into Cambodia and Laos.

In late April 1970, III and IV Corps launched major cross-border operations into Cambodia *(Exemplar Battle 1)* following a March 1970 pro-Allied coup and fighting between PAVN and Cambodian forces. In May 1970, the offensive was joined by elements of two U.S. divisions along with further RVNAF units. By June 1970 when American forces pulled back across the border the operation was judged a resounding success that had greatly damaged communist logistics areas and shown significant improvements in RVNAF capabilities.

Buoyed by the success of the Cambodian incursion, the U.S. and RVNAF launched Lam Son 719 *(Exemplar Battle 2)*, a cross-border offensive attempting to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos, in February 1971. Although U.S. ground forces secured the path to the border and helicopters and aircraft provided combat air support, the operation was conducted solely by RVNAF ground forces. Although this operation

[460] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 3-4.

also significantly damaged communist logistics bases, a corps-sized force of RVNAF elite units floundered in the extremely wooded and mountainous terrain under heavy PAVN assault and only extricated themselves after incurring extremely heavy casualties.[461]

The final major campaign of this period was the PAVN "Easter Offensive" of 1972, a general offensive conducted by almost the entire PAVN and attempting to seize provincial centers in I Corps *(Exemplar Battle 3)*, II Corps, and III Corps. After initial surprise, RVNAF ground forces, supported by the VNAF and massive U.S. Air Force support and US Naval gunfire withstood the majority of the assaults, and were able to successfully counterattack to regain all but some of northern Quang Tri province along the DMZ from PAVN attackers.[462] Although this attack showed that significant shortfalls in command and control remained to be addressed, they also demonstrated significant improvement in many RVNAF units. The RVNAF could fight largely on their own, but most remained dependent on advisory support and all remained heavily dependent on U.S. air support (detailed further below).

Handing over all combat operations to the South Vietnamese meant that the Regional Forces and Popular Forces would now assume primary responsibility for rural pacification and local security – the role for which they had had been originally created. The territorial forces were more than doubled in size between 1968 and 1973. The RF increased in size from 1050 companies to 1850 and the PF increased in size from 4560

[461] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 13.
[462] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 13.

platoons to 8166.[463] In theory, this would allow the ARVN to become more mobile and less tied to static security, although this latter goal was much harder to accomplish.

The departure of US ground forces from South Vietnam removed an immense amount of combat power from the allied war effort. In some ways this produced positive impacts for the South Vietnamese. U.S. forces transferred large amounts of more modern equipment to the RVNAF as they departed. However, the overall impact was a negative. South Vietnam had only a limited population which was already largely mobilized. While the RVNAF did expand significantly during Vietnamization – eventually reaching a total force size of 1.1 million under arms – it was unable to fully backfill the equivalent of more than ten divisions worth of powerful American and Allied ground combat formations with equal formations of its own to match its continually expanding North Vietnamese adversaries.[464]

South Vietnam could not match the expansion in the territorial forces with a corresponding increase in conventional ground forces. The new ARVN 3d Division was finally fielded in early 1972, but much of its forces were pulled out of the existing 1st and 2d Divisions. What the RVNAF did, however, gain were provide long-needed expansions to its crucial supporting elements. Within the regular divisions and corps, logistics and transportation units were increased. The CIDG forces were integrated into the regular RVNAF structure as Ranger 'border defense battalions.' The Rangers activated seventeen group commands combining their individual battalions into what were essentially

[463] Khuyen, 9-10.
[464] Khuyen, 9-10; Hinh, 778-779.

‘Ranger brigades.’ The Marines received an additional brigade of three battalions and a full division headquarters to enable the VNMC to function as a complete division. The Air Force again doubled its fighter force from five to eleven fighter/ground attack squadrons. South Vietnamese helicopter transport finally became a fully-fledged rather than niche capability with their previous five aging H34 helicopter squadrons replaced by seventeen UH-1 Huey squadrons and four CH-47 Chinook squadrons. Their three aging C-47 fixed wing transport squadrons were increased and modernized to three C-7 and two C-130 squadrons.[465]

Vietnamization had produced major strides for the RVNAF, but it ended as a work still in progress. Within sixty days of the signing of the Paris Peace agreement on January 28, 1973, the last U.S. and allied military advisory teams departed, ending an eighteen year advisory presence.[466] Within two years, Saigon fell to a North Vietnamese conventional invasion after the withdrawal of U.S. security assistance funding and after the North had received a massive infusion of weapons and other support from both China and the USSR. This last period (1973-1975) is not covered by the scope of this dissertation.

Patron Intervention: Training

Under Vietnamization, MACV continued to train and build a force for the mission that the Americans envisaged – a counter insurgency fight versus guerilla forces backed

[465] Khuyen, 10.
[466] Hinh,

by occasional light infantry units from North Vietnam. From the beginning of Vietnamization, Joint General Staff Chief GEN Vien and other RVNAF officials pushed for a reorganization with more heavy equipment to be able to stand alone against the North Vietnamese.[467] However, the majority of their requests for main battle tanks, self-propelled artillery and antitank missiles were rejected by GEN Abrams and MACV. Only one battalion of M48 tanks was fielded by mid-1971. As Vietnamization progressed, the U.S. began to increase their training and fielding of the helicopters, fighter bombers and the limited logistical organization they felt was required to support a counterinsurgency campaign. Greater focus was placed on training the paramilitary forces to have a degree of mobility in their general areas. However, the only forces trained and organized as a mobile reserve were the marine and airborne divisions as well as reorganized ranger groups.[468]

The major increases in size of the territorial forces was accompanied by a major training effort to ensure that the new and existing forces were more effectively prepared for their expanded role in local security. Although the regional and provincial training centers were still in existence and greatly expanded, U.S. advisors had begun to realize that American mobile training teams were much more effective than the South Vietnamese training infrastructure that the U.S. had developed. Accordingly, U.S. Mobile Advisory Training Teams (MATTs) and Mobile Advisory Logistics Teams (MALTs)

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[467] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 276.
[468] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 277.

travelled around the country to provide training and upgrades to armament, communications and transportation for both the RF and PF.[469]

Another aspect of Vietnamization, begun slightly earlier in 1968, was the increasing use of on-the-job training. The first of these programs was the "Buddy" project undertaken by the US 1st Logistics Command which trained ARVN logistics personnel in the use, maintenance, and supply requirements of the new equipment that was being transferred to allow the development of a stand-alone South Vietnamese logistics capability. ARVN students reported daily to the U.S. units that were handing over the equipment and worked side-by-side with their American counterparts, greatly increasing the speed of their learning. By 1970, this became a regularized form of training in the handover of equipment to the Vietnamese navy and ARVN engineer, signal, facilities and transportation units. Again South Vietnamese went to American facilities where they worked side by side with Americans who were gradually faced out until the new personnel were ready to assume control.[470]

The previous chapter described how a crash on-the-job training program had introduced the M-16 rifle in 1968. Similarly, during the Easter Offensive in 1972, mobile U.S. army training teams hastily introduced the heavier TOW antitank weapons system to ARVN forces, travelling from unit to unit.[471] This provided for a much more effective antitank performance in the latter half of this campaign, as will be described further below in Examplar Battle 3. Following the Easter offensive, the realization that RVNAF

[469] Khuyen, 9-10.
[470] Khuyen, 42.
[471] Khuyen, 59.

forces were not equipped to fight heavier T-54 tanks led to a late 1972 effort to field and equip ARVN armor with a greater number of the heavier M48A3 tanks, ARVN artillery with more 175mm artillery, and the VNAF with more C130 transports and F-5 fighters. A hectic pace of shipments and mobile training efforts raced to beat the cease-fire deadline as the end of 1972 approached in attempt to finally make the RVNAF a heavier and more independent force.[472]

Patron Intervention: Command and Control

GEN Abrams inherited the lack of unified operational control between RVNAF and American (and other allied) forces.[473]

In 1968, as the U.S. faced a number of successive PAVN counter-offensives trying to regain the initiative that they had briefly held during the Tet Offensive, several U.S. corps-sized headquarters were established in an effort to better coordinate U.S. forces as well as interactions with the RVNAF forces in the area. In mid-1968, MACV-Forward, which had been established to control U.S. Army forces in northern I Corps during the initial Tet offensive, transitioned to become Provisional Corps Vietnam, and then the U.S. XXIV Corps. In June 1968, the temporary forward headquarters which II Field Forces had established to coordinate operations in and around Saigon became the Capital Military Assistance Command, working with the Saigon-Gia Dinh governor. A year later, in April 1969, the U.S. completed the partnering of a headquarters with each

[472] Khuyen, 62.
[473] Sorley, 30.

RVNAF corps by establishing the Delta Military Assistance Command (DMAC). The DMAC controlled the U.S. forces recently deployed in the Mekong Delta including the 9th Infantry Division and its commander also served as the senior advisor to the RVNAF IV Corps commander.[474]

In keeping with GEN Abrams' focus on population security and the approaching requirement to assume primary responsibility for the pacification mission, MACV's CORDS directorate worked with the JGS to implement command and control improvements for territorial forces. The first task was to develop a rapid reaction capability so that these elements – which constituted almost half of the total RVNAF strength -- could finally contribute to security in proportion to their manpower.[475]

In 1969, RF "company group" headquarters were activated at the provincial level.[476] That same year, a test of grouping RF forces into battalions capable of conducting mobile operations was successful and expanded into a nationwide effort. By June 1970, 31 RF battalions had been formed and by 1973, the entire force had been successfully transitioned into 360 RF battalions. Their successful performance in mobile operations at the provincial level, in major operations alongside regular forces, and even in cross-border operations into Cambodia in 1970 as will be described below proved highly successful in freeing ARVN infantry divisions for major combat operations. The JGS was highly encouraged by this effort, and by 1974 began working to group them into

[474] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation*, 49-50.
[475] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 189-190.
[476] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 189.

regimental sized "mobile groups" with their own intrinsic artillery batteries. The collapse of South Vietnam occurred before this plan could come fully into fruition. [477]

Attempts were also made to make the RVNAF less static and tied to the defense of a particular area. The improvement of the territorial forces as discussed above, was the first and became increasingly successful. The second was an attempt to make the conventional forces themselves more mobile. In 1970, the JGS dissolved the Division Tactical Areas and renamed Corps Tactical Zones as "Military Regions" (a return to the original territorial command structure). Rather than being rigidly assigned to specific areas, ARVN divisions would instead be given informal areas of tactical responsibility that could shift according to the local security situation. This provided little real improvement, however. With the increasing departure of U.S. forces, the RVNAF did not have the military force available to shift divisions from one area of Vietnam to another without losing control of the area they had departed. The territorials were not yet capable of assuming all security responsibilities in the absence of heavier forces. Additionally, the transition from CTZ to MR was nothing more than a name change. The same corps headquarters continued to manage the military regions, with no improvement in command and control capability.[478]

As control of the war transitioned to South Vietnamese control, the U.S. reduced and transformed the command and control structures of its own corps headquarters into a largely advisory presence maintained at each RVNAF corps headquarters. The new

[477] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 190-191.
[478] Truong, "Territorial Forces," 184.

organizations coordinated the remaining American assets and assisted their partnered RVNAF corps commanders and staff with commanding and controlling their assigned forces. To reflect their new missions, I and II Field Force became the Second and Third Regional Assistance Commands (SRAC and TRAC - named to match the Military Regions with which they were partnered) and the Delta Military Assistance Command became the Delta Regional Assistance Command (DRAC).[479] Following the withdrawal of the last remaining U.S. combat forces supporting cross-border operations in Laos and other operations in the north, XXIV Corps was the last to transition and became the First Regional Assistance Command (FRAC) on March 19, 1972, shortly before the onset of the Easter offensive (*Examplar Battle 3* below).

In May 1971, John Paul Vann of Ap Bac fame, now a USAID senior level civilian serving as a CORDS regional directory, became head of SRAC due to his close relationship with the newly appointed ARVN II Military Region commander, LTG Dzu. SRAC became SRAG, the 2d Regional Assistance "Group" to prevent any legal concerns with having a civilian in a military command. Regardless of semantics, the experienced Vann nevertheless had the same authority as his U.S. general officer peers.[480]

In contrast to his U.S. military peers, however, Vann was much more aggressive in wielding his influence over his partnered RVNAF Corps, both in command and control and in promotions (discussed further below). When Dzu became acting commander of IV Corps following the death of IV Corps Command LTG Thanh during the Cambodian

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[479] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal*, 211, 356.
[480] Dale Andrade, *America's Last Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2001) 204, 209; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 211*.

Incursion, Vann essentially became the 'power behind the throne' for Dzu, who closely adhered to his advice and planning input. When Dzu moved from IV Corps to the critical II Corps area, Vann followed him. II Corps had traditionally suffered from poor leadership and unfortunately the hesitant Dzu was little different – with the exception that he followed all of Vann's input to the letter.[481] When Dzu later withered under the pressure of the 1972 Easter Offensive, Vann stepped in and acted as the de facto RVNAF commander. In this particular case, Vann was essential to holding the Corps together.[482] However, it is debatable whether - outside of the crisis period - this sort of overly controlling and micromanaging approach by Vann stifled the development of initiative and competence in the South Vietnamese on the II Corps staff.

Patron Intervention: Promotions/Advancement

During the later years of the war, greater numbers of competent company and field grade officers began to advance through the RVNAF ranks and a greater number of competent and aggressive leaders began to emerge at the senior ranks. Promotion for merit at the level of battalion commanders and below was more common in units led by an emerging number of competent senior leaders such as LTGs Tri and Thanh in IV Corps and MG Truong in the 1st Division (and later in IV Corps).[483] However, bureaucratic inefficiencies at the lower levels and continuing political maneuvering at the

[481] Andrade, 207-209.
[482] Andrade, 253.
[483] Clarke, 471.

senior levels continued to create obstacles to the widespread promotion of competent and experienced leaders.

Although a number of initiatives were initiated by lower level MACV staff officers and institutional level advisors, MACV senior leaders did not make the promotion of bureaucratic improvements to the promotion process a priority. Without senior level intervention, lower level MACV staffers were unable to create the major institutional reforms that they sought. The pace of promotions did not keep up with the need for competent officers in a rapidly expanding military. [484]

The JGS continued to adhere to a more peacetime and steady state system of promotions based on time in grade and academic qualifications. MACV was only able to make minor progress towards reducing time in grade and secondary school requirements towards an emphasis on battlefield performance and battlefield promotions. The South Vietnamese officer corps remained largely dominated by the small number of [more educated] urban elites which was insufficient to fill the required numbers of promotions, let alone fill them with the most qualified. Evan after exemplary performance by a number of non-commissioned officers during the Easter Offensive, the JGS remained rigidly committed to its standards and most battlefield promotion requests were turned down. [485]

Although the degree of political maneuvering was greatly reduced, it still remained a factor in promotions at senior ranks, and in some cases was still a factor

[484] Clarke, 469.
[485] Clarke, 466-468.

protecting ineffective, but politically connected battalion commanders in their positions.[486] At the general officer level, President Thieu still remained the absolute arbiter of key command positions. Although not as much as MACV would have preferred, as Vietnamization progressed, GEN Abrams was able to pressure Thieu to remove egregiously ineffective commanders on several occasions.

The MACV commander remained the primary U.S. force able to occasionally challenge ineffective commanders. Most other U.S. commanders were more hesitant to influence promotions, although – as with command and control – here John Paul Vann also stood out as somewhat of an anomaly. Using influence gained through years in Vietnam as a military advisor and later as a U.S. Agency for International Development CORDS advisor, Vann was much more successful than his peers in influencing the system to promote those he felt deserved it. As an example, Vann helped influence the selection of COL Ly Tong Ba (The ARVN mechanized commander at Ap Bac who had risen through the ranks and developed a reputation as a capable officer following that battle) up through the ranks and ultimately in January 1972 to become commander of the ARVN 23rd Division underneath Vann's partnered II Corps.[487]

Despite all this – change from a system based purely on political connections to a system based on merit *was* occurring. The problem during Vietnamization was that the pace of change was slow and the rapid U.S. drawdown was creating a narrow window of opportunity now that change was finally happening. Unfortunately, Thieu only had a

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[486] Wiest, 147, 178.
[487] Andrade, 253.

smaller bench of recognizably competent officers – and the President's previous political connections to other senior officers from the days when the military collectively ran the country created problems. Rather than eliminating problem generals, Thieu often just shuffled them around. Thus, for example, GEN Abrams was able to achieve the removal of 5th Division Commander MG Hieu after his poor handling of the division during cross border operations in Cambodia in 1971. However, his replacement, COL Hung, had been an ineffective provincial governor who the Americans had directly lobbied against. Although removed from the 5th Division, Hieu was in fact promoted into a new job as deputy commander of I Corps.[488] Compounded with the equally ineffective I Corps commander, LTG Lam, this simply created another for MACV in a different area.

Similarly, the less competent Dzu was moved from temporary command of IV Corps and replaced by MG Truong, promoted from command of the 1st Division in the north. The highly populated IV Corps region in the Mekong Delta was an important command that had long been held by more competent officers. Additionally, this was a region where competent officers had stood out because the U.S. presence was so low and the South Vietnamese had always had the lead for combat operations – unlike anywhere else in the country. The previous permanent commander, LTG Thanh, had been judged by American commanders as the best in the RVNAF. In Truong, his slot was now being filled by an equally qualified officer.

This was a promising move. But by moving Dzu to II Corps rather than simply replacing him, Thieu didn't complete remove his problem. II Corps in the Central

[488] Clarke, 478.

Highlands had traditionally been an area where less competent officers were placed. Creating a "dumping ground" for problem officers created one area of significant weakness when the entire country was under threat – as was shown by Dzu's poor performance during the Easter Offensive and the near collapse of this region under a strong PAVN assault.

These sorts of promotions up to the senior ranks were fairly limited. Truong did move up to Corps command and Ba did move up to division command. Overall, however, the web of senior officers with political connections to President Thieu (from the earlier period of collective military leadership of South Vietnam) slowed the pace of change from the large housecleaning that MACV sought to a much more gradual transition.

Barring these occasional successes, MACV's ability to influence command changes and internal reorganizations in the RVNAF remained limited. The political maneuvering of 1963-1965 had become firmly entrenched in the senior levels of the RVNAF and personal, political, regional and family relationships still determined entry to the senior levels of the officer corps.[489]

Combat Force Commitment

Under GEN Abrams and with the decision to reduce U.S. involvement and turn over combat responsibility to the war to the RVNAF, MACV completely changed its approach towards combined operations with South Vietnamese. The MACV Combined

[489] Clarke, 479.

Campaign Plan for 1969 ended the division of missions between U.S. and South Vietnamese forces.[490] Operational cooperation and coordination now became a systemic effort as part of the overall goal of improving RVNAF combat effectiveness.

Following the Tet Offensive, a series of successful counterattacks had been launched by US and ARVN forces and the new MACV leadership team sought to maintain this new level of partnership with a more systematic approach. As U.S. combat power decreased, this partnership gradually became more limited, but 1969 saw two significant success as the Allies moved towards a leading role for the RVNAF in 1970 and beyond.

The 'pair-off' concept was begun in the middle of 1968 as an attempt to regularize partnered operations in the II Corps Tactical Zone. Prior to the Tet Offensive, U.S. I Field Force elements focused on fighting enemy main force elements in the central highlands while ARVN II Corps elements generally focused on pacification operations in lowland areas and urban centers. The new approach sought to upgrade RVNAF unit effectiveness and prepare them to assume a larger burden of combat responsibilities. To accomplish this, each South Vietnamese unit would be closely and continually associated with a US counterpart unit of varying size. In addition to focusing on subordinate combat units, the concept sought to improve II Corps staff effectiveness, but implementing monthly staff meetings between II Corps, I Field Force, and ROK commanders (there

[490] Wiest, 155.

were 2 ROK divisions in II CTZ at the time) and pushing daily coordination between their staffs. [491]

An example of the pair-off concept in action was Operation Dan Thang/McLain in August 1968– two U.S. infantry battalions and an armored cavalry squadron combined forces with two regiments of the ARVN 23d division and the 2d Ranger Group as well as local RF and PF in an offensive role. The US task force and ARVN division co-located their command posts and conducted coordinated plans and operations involving bilingual operational plans and orders and briefings. Operations sought to match US companies with RVNAF companies in both ground and air assault operations, with increased effectiveness observed in the partnered RVNAF forces[492].

Despite these sorts of successes throughout 1968 and 1969 in II CTZ, U.S. commanders assessed that overall effectiveness gains were only moderate and limited by significant shortfalls in RVNAF leadership throughout all levels in II Corps. At the end of the 18-month program, I Field Force leaders assessed the corps was improving but weaknesses in staff and key leader training and experience would take a significant amount of further joint operations that were eventually unsustainable due to the U.S. troop drawdown.[493]

During the dry season of 1969, a similar but more successful partnering program – Dong Tien (Progress Forward) – was implemented in III CTZ by the U.S. II Field Force and ARVN III Corps commanders. Dong Tien sought to pair ARVN and U.S. battalions

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[491] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 135-136.

[492] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 139.
[493] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 140-141.

together for combined operations until the ARVN unit had reached a satisfactory level of effectiveness and was then returned to independent operations. Seven joint coordination areas were established pairing ARVN and territorial units with U.S. and Australian divisions and separate brigades and co-locating RVNAF (ARVN infantry, Airborne, and Ranger) and Allied battalions together for joint operations, often involving individual companies working together.[494] Performance was evaluated by a team of senior coordinated appointed by the U.S. and ARVN division commanders. [495] As with the pair-off program, this dramatically increased the regular interaction between US (and Australian) and South Vietnamese personnel at all levels, resulting in a great deal of learning and subsequent emulation.

Two factors seem to have been keys to success in this program (vs. the less successful II CTZ effort). First, the III Corps commander was actively involved in the effort in close partnership with his American II Field Force peer. Second, in Dong Tien, units were not simply just operating together. There was a clear exit point - a loosely designated level of effectiveness at which point the ARVN unit was released to independent operations which seems to have been a significant motivator. Although this program was short lived, it appears to have had a definite improvement in effectiveness at the regimental level and below, characterized by increased aggressiveness, more sustained activity during combat, and improved coordination between units. The proof of the program's success was borne out a year later when III Corps executed a cross-border

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[494] Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*. Indochina Monograph Series (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 6; Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 143-147.
[495] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 144.

offensive into Cambodia (*Exemplar Battle 1* below) with relatively little American assistance.[496]

The important thing to note about this dramatic change of approach in both II and III Corps was that both resulted in upward movement in RVNAF effectiveness (although much greater and in a shorter period of time in III Corps) while still accomplishing the mission of degrading the enemy. In the case of III CTZ, the vast majority of US and Australian forces were devoted to Dong Tien zones. But these zones weren't randomly determined – they were the places of greatest enemy threat where the Allies needed to be conducting combat operations anyway. In both of these CTZs, the Allies didn't stop combat operations to train – instead they were able to perform on-the-job training by partnering in the midst of combat operations, with resulting improvement in effectiveness for all involved tactical elements from RF/PF up to the ARVN regimental level.

This essentially had been performed in northern I Corps with the partnership of the 1st Division and U.S. forces since at least the middle of 1966. Under the "One War" doctrine of GEN Abrams this was simply being extended throughout the whole of the country. If such an approach had been taken across the country as soon as the South Vietnamese government situation began to stabilize (following the Buddhist crisis of early 1966) or even earlier, one can imagine that the overall level of RVNAF effectiveness might have been significantly higher by the onset of Vietnamization and might have produced a very different set of outcomes.

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[496] Truong, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination*, 147-148.

Exemplar Battle 1: Cambodian Incursion – Operation Toan Thang 42 (Apr 30- July 9, 1970)

US Security Forces Committed: **Limited**
Primacy of US Combat Force Mission to: **Partnering**
Advisors down to what level: **Battalion (limited to 30 km deep into Cambodia from 30 Apr-30 June)**

From April 30 to July 9, 1970, III and IV Corps conducted Operation Toan Thang ("Total Victory") 42. Toan Thang 42 was one of a number of cross-border operations conducted by the U.S. and South Vietnam during the Cambodian Incursion of 1970 – a combined offensive taking advantage of a newly friendly Cambodian post-coup d'etat government and seeking to disrupt North Vietnamese supply bases and infiltration routes running along the Cambodian border. Whereas major combat operations from 1965-1970 had largely seen the RVNAF in support of U.S. forces, the Cambodian incursion was a major change, with ARVN forces playing a major role. Toan Thang 42 stands out from these other operations, however, in that it was the largest single operation conducted to date by the RVNAF and it was solely accomplished by South Vietnamese forces (including without U.S. advisors for some parts of the operation). This operation shows an emerging RVNAF capable of largely independent operations with greatly improved effectiveness over that found prior to U.S. intervention.

The Situation

South Vietnam's long western border with Laos to the north and Cambodia to the south had long presented an exposed flank. North Vietnam's de facto control of the Laotian and Cambodian border areas allowed them a sanctuary which they used to

infiltrate military forces, weapons, ammunition, and all manner of critically supplies to their forces in South Vietnam. Their support network consisted of two main routes. The first ran south down the Ho Chi Minh trail – a series of dirt roads, trails, and supply

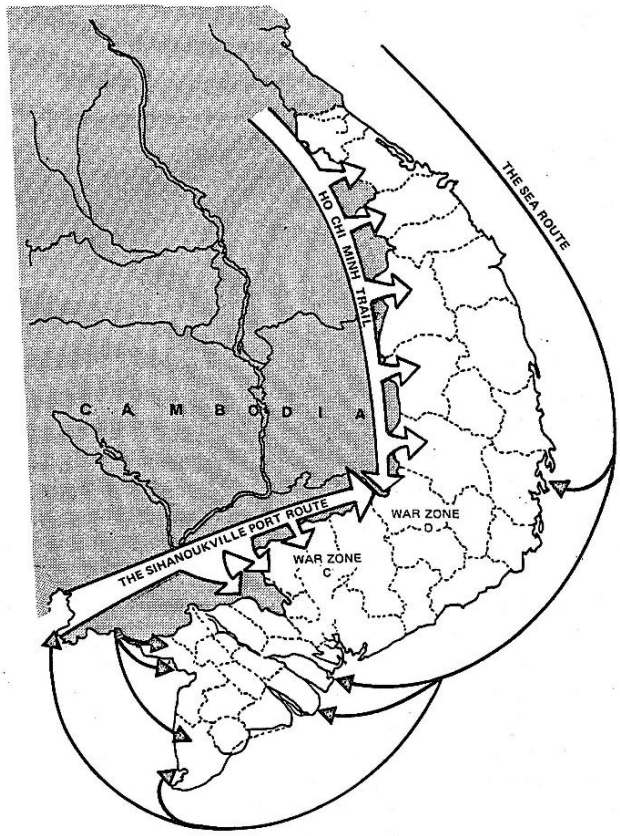

Figure 11: PAVN Main Infiltration Routes into South Vietnam[497]

[497] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 19.

caches from North Vietnam down through the Laotian and Cambodian border areas. The second ran along a much easier route using asphalt roads running from the southern Cambodian port of Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand east to base areas along the South Vietnamese border.[498]

The heavily populated southern half of South Vietnam neighboring Cambodia contained two-thirds of its population, defended by the ARVN III and IV corps tactical zones. By 1970, however, just across the border from III Corps in Cambodia stood seven major North Vietnamese base areas, some within 35 miles of Saigon, with three more further south across from the neighboring IV corps tactical zone.[499] Additionally, the National Liberation Front's Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) – the element responsible for command and control of all North Vietnamese-sponsored political and military activity in South Vietnam, was based on the Cambodian border with South Vietnam.[500]

Although the US had made numerous attempts to disrupt the Cambodian support networks with air strikes, they had only achieved temporary success, and were unable to cut off the flow of supplies and reinforcements into South Vietnam.[501] The situation, however, changed dramatically when a coup d'etat removed Cambodian ruler Prince Norodom Shihanouk from power in March 1970.

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[498] John M. Shaw, *The U.S. Army in the 1970 Cambodian Incursion*, Dissertation, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky 1995. UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1996, 6-7.
[499] Palmer, 292.
[500] Palmer, 294.
[501] Shaw, 247-248.

Unrest and anti-communist demonstrations swept Cambodia when Sihanouk departed the country for an international tour and his former Premier, Lon Nol, seized power with the backing of the National Assembly on 18 March 1970. Whereas Sihanouk had passively accepted the North Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, the new government was not and demanded the withdrawal of the PAVN and PLAF forces which maintained de facto control of eastern Cambodia.[502]

The North Vietnamese reacted swiftly and violently. Loss of the critical infiltration routes through Cambodia would restrict them to attacking only through Laos and across the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam – a potentially catastrophic impact.[503] On 1 April, the North Vietnamese launched operations against the tiny Cambodian army and over the course of the next two weeks seized control of the three Cambodian border provinces, with further operations threatening five more. During these attacks, North Vietnamese infiltrators were able to blend in with the large Vietnamese population living and working in Cambodia. This led to extensive violence against the general population of Vietnamese in Cambodia due to fear by native ethnic Khmer in Cambodia of ties to the North Vietnamese.[504]

With more than a third of his country under North Vietnamese control or under attack, on Lon Nol appealed for aid to the U.S., South Vietnam and the rest of the free world on Apr 13, 1970. The Nixon administration gave orders to begin planning for

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[502] D.I. Folkman, Jr and P.D. Caine, "The Cambodian Campaign: 29 April-30 June 1970," Headquarters, Pacific Air Force, Directorate of Operations Analysis. Project CHECO Reports. Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/96734, Folkman, Jr and Caine, 64-5.
[503] Shaw, 28.
[504] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 32.

cross-border operations – a topic which the Joint Staff and MACV had been openly deliberated since the previous year.[505]

The South Vietnamese, however, acted even more rapidly and began limited cross-border operations soon after the coup. Observing the dissention between the Cambodians and North Vietnamese, President Theui issued verbal orders directly to his Corps commanders to begin limited cross-border raids.[506] On 20 and 27 March and 5 and 12 April, the ARVN conducted a series of one-day raids across the border.[507]

On 14 April, however, now with the full consent of the Cambodian government and with U.S. planning assistance, Operation Toan Thang (Total Victory) 41 was launched by III Corps to relieve pressure on the Cambodians. Over the course of three days, three regimental-sized armor-infantry task forces swept through North Vietnamese Base Area 706, a large supply base fifty kilometers west of Saigon. With the PAVN oriented to the west against the Cambodians they were caught off guard and suffered four hundred dead and the loss of tons of weapons, ammunition, rice, and valuable intelligence information.[508]

Significantly, this operation was accomplished without U.S. advisors, who remained on the South Vietnamese side of the border.[509] As such, although the operation had limited objectives, it was a tremendous morale boost, and encouraged the South Vietnamese to consider larger operations. Unfortunately it also sacrificed strategic

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[505] Folkman, Jr and Caine, 6. Sorley, 200.
[506] Tho 44.
[507] Shaw, 36.
[508] Shaw, 35-36.
[509] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 44.

surprise and the North Vietnamese were now aware that they were fighting in two directions.[510]

The Plan (host nation and patron)

On 26 March, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff directed GEN Abrams to begin detailed planning for attacks into the North Vietnamese sanctuaries on the Cambodian Border. Over the course of April, MACV called in the I and II Field Force staffs and eventually the JGS was also brought in although the Americans were concerned with leaks within the South Vietnamese headquarters. The output of these higher level planning effort was a plan for a number of attacks by both US and ARVN forces into different zones to minimize interference between the two allied forces.[511]

A total of ten distinct operations would be conducted by the U.S. and RVNAF over the course of the overall incursion, involving both the U.S. I and II Field Forces and RVNAF II, III and IV Corps.[512] For political considerations, US forces, including Army aviation, were limited to advancing no further than 30 kilometers into Cambodia.[513] In contrast, President Thieu's directive to the JGS authorized the RFNAF to conduct operations in a slightly deeper zone running 40-60 kilometers deep.[514]

Among the most critical objectives for the entire incursion were the border areas west of Saigon known as the Fishhook, Angel's Wing, and Parrot's Beak which

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[510] Shaw, 37.
[511] Shaw, 44-45.
[512] Sorley, 202.
[513] Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, "II FFORCEV Commander's Evaluation Report - Cambodian Operations." (31 July 1970), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/ 90504, 8.
[514] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 36.

comprised a number of enemy bases and supply areas as well as the COSVN headquarters directing the war effort in the southern half of South Vietnam. [515] U.S. II Field Force Commander LTG Michael Davison and RVNAF III Corps commander LTG Tri agreed to partition their jointly assigned tasks so that II Field Force and supporting ARVN units would take the northern portions of their assigned set of objectives, while III Corps would take start off in the south with independent RFVAF ground operations.[516]

The allocation was meant to emphasize the comparative strengths of the forces. III Corps was directed by JGS to begin coordination with II Field Force staff on 14 April, 1970. Subsequent to this coordination, they then completed their own internal planning by 27 April.[517] The American-led operation to the north would leverage the airmobile superiority of U.S. forces for a shallower penetration against more mountainous and difficult terrain. Toan Thang 42, the III Corps attack, would begin on a smaller frontage using its mechanized forces on the flatter and more open terrain further south against the so-called "Angel's Wing" and "Parrot's Beak portions of the border which protruded into South Vietnam and separated III Corps from IV Corps. The plan envisioned a multi-phase operation to "destroy and neutralize [PLAF] bases in Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province, clear enemy pressure," allow for the repatriation of Vietnamese residing in Cambodia, and assist Cambodian forces.[518] Subsequent phases would include IV Corps units attacking from the south to link up with III Corps units.

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[515] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 39.
[516] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,*40.
[517] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," 3.
[518] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 54.

For this cross border attack, III Corps had taken 4 armored cavalry squadrons (composed of M41 tanks and M113 APCs), 2 ranger groups (each of 3 battalions), and the 25th Division's 46th Infantry Regiment and task organized them into three regimental sized infantry-armor combined arms "task forces."[519] All three task forces, had already participated in the earlier Toan Thang 41 raid into Cambodia from 14-17 April.[520] Although various subordinate infantry, ranger, and later airborne battalions would rotate in and out of these task forces for rest and reconstitution at various phases of the operation, these three command structures would remain throughout the operation.

Command and Control

Operation Toan Thang 42 was conducted with III Corps in the lead, to be joined in phase two by IV Corps. The two corps commanders – III Corps Commander LTG Do Cao Tri and IV Corps Commander LTG Ngyuen Viet Thanh – were highly regarded by their American peers.[521]

III Corps commander LTG Do Cao Tri maintained close ties to the president. MACV Commander GEN Abrams observed that "Tri has dinner with the President once or twice a week. He gets operational approval, that sort of thing, and [JGS Chief of Staff] Vien's not in on that."[522] Although both III and IV Corps were operating as part of an overall combined plan for the Cambodian Incursion developed in collaboration by the JGS and MACV, they also received direct guidance for particular tasks – such as the

[519] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 42.
[520] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 46-47.
[521] Sorley, 210-211.
[522] Sorley, 181.

repatriation of Vietnamese citizens from Cambodia – prior to and during the operation directly from President Thieu.[523]

In both the III Corps and IV Corps-led portions of the Cambodian Incursion, the attacking combat forces operated in regimental-sized armor and infantry combined arms task forces. In the case of III Corps, these three task forces were based around three pre-existing "reserve task force" headquarters structures formed by LTG Tri several months earlier in March, 1970, and reporting directly to the Corps headquarters.[524] During the operation, Tri changed task force leadership based on the requirements of each particular mission, alternating task force leadership between regimental commanders, armor squadron commanders, and the corps ranger commander to maintain unity of command but also ensure tactical flexibility.[525] The IV Corps took a slightly different approach -- forming four task forces around existing 9th Division elements and attaching mechanized and ranger elements rather than creating new command structures.[526]

Both of these aggressive corps commanders used their combined arms task forces similarly – personally directed their task forces to maintain momentum. While this ensured that their intent was carried out, the respective division headquarters for these forces played very little part in commanding and controlling these operations. Their role was largely restricted to administrative support to their units.[527]

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[523] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 43.
[524] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 54.
[525] Vien, "Leadership," 301.
[526] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 59.
[527] Clarke, 418.

Although the Cambodian incursion was a priority for President Thieu, the personal involvement of one of his most loyal commanders, LTG Tri presented a political concern for the president since Tri's III Corps controlled the military forces in the Saigon area. With Tri across the border, Thieu was concerned about the loyalty of Tri's deputy, MG Chinh – a Ky ally – and so Chinh was transferred to the Central Training Command.[528] Although more politically liable in terms of his loyalty to President Thieu, Chinh's replacement, MG Thu, was considered a "drunkard" and a "playboy" and advisors considered him a poor deputy for the dynamic and aggressive LTG Tri.[529]

Although the operation was solely conducted by South Vietnamese maneuver units, Toan Thang 42 was a heavy support priority for the US II Field Force[530]. To ensure effective support, II Field Force established liaison teams with each of the ARVN task forces in III and IV Corps as well as at the III and IV Corps headquarters. A team from the U.S. 23d Artillery Group set up with the III Corps tactical operations center to coordinate and control all U.S. artillery fires in support of the operation.[531] Similarly, a team from the U.S. 12th Army Aviation Group set up with the III Corps forward headquarters to coordinate forward air control, attack helicopter and logistics support for the III Corps units as well as escort for their own supporting VNAF helicopters.[532]

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[528] Clarke, 421.
[529] Clarke, 423.
[530] II Field Force committed extensive artillery, logistics, and maintenance support as well as comb to the operation to augment RVNAF capabilities.
[531] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex G (Artillery).
[532] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex I (Army Aviation).

To ensure timely and responsive aerial support and to positively identify friendly South Vietamese units and prevent friendly fire, the U.S. 12th Aviation group provided 'Aerial Aviation Control Teams' (AACTs). These AACTs consisted of a U.S. advisor and III Corps representative flown in an American UH-1 Huey command and control helicopters and maintaining continuous communications with the RVNAF maneuver task forces on the ground and with the III Corps Forward command post. Together with the supporting aviation and artillery liaison teams located with the various III Corps headquarters elements, this allowed for the provision of responsive helicopter medevac, helicopter gunship, tactical air and artillery support from both U.S. and RVNAF elements for the maneuver task forces throughout the operation. [533]

Although the VNAF's new forward air controllers (FACs) were involved in the operation flying aloft in light fixed wing aircraft, their role was to direct preplanned airstrikes rather than to respond to more dynamic requests for immediate airstrikes or to supervise search and rescue operations for downed pilots. These tasks were assigned to American FACs.[534]

Advisory Relationship

Planning efforts for Toan Thang 42 were largely conducted by III Corps staff with support from BG McAuliffe, the Deputy Senior Advisor to III Corps.[535] American advisors were present with ARVN units from the battalion level and above. Due to the political sensitivities of the operation, U.S. personnel were only able to operate up to 30

[533] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex I (Army Aviation).
[534] Folkman, Jr and Cain, 24.
[535] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 42.

km deep into Cambodia from 30 April until 30 June, whereas Vice President Ky had negotiated permission from the Cambodian government for their South Vietnamese counterparts to operate in a strip running up to sixty kilometers deep.[536]

Toan Thang 41 and 42 demonstrated the RVNAF beginning to operate without the U.S. advisory presence. American advisors did not cross the border with the III Corps task forces in the Toan Thang 41 raids, which occurred before U.S. personnel had been allowed to enter Cambodia.[537] For the majority of Toan Thang 42, however, U.S. advisors were able to participate alongside their assigned units. However, when South Vietnamese units moved deeper into Cambodia for operations in and around Kampong Cham later in the operation, U.S. personnel were withdrawn and did not participate.[538] Nor did they participate in the subsequent RFNAF operations that continued after the U.S. withdrawal date. [539]

Conduct of the Operation

Toan Thang 42 was a multi-stage operation which would eventually consist of six phases. [540] The first stage seized lines of communications into Cambodia along Route 1 (a highway). The second stage would combine efforts with neighboring IV Corps forces to the south to jointly seize the Parrot's Beak, and then in later stages III Corps forces would advance west to the Mekong River and then north to relieve the Cambodian city of Kampong Cham from PLAF attack.[541]

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[536] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 300.
[537] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 57.
[538] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," 7.
[539] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 69.
[540] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 51.
[541] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 40.

Clearing Route 1 into Cambodia

On 28 April, the III Corps task forces moved into staging areas along the border. Task Force (TF) 318 was deployed along route 1 in the south, with TF 333 and TF 225 to its north. The III Corps forward headquarters and the logistics support units of the 3d ALC were set up in and around the South Vietnamese border town of Go Dau Ha. On 29 April, the task forces launched Phase I of Toan Thang 42. After preparatory air and artillery bombardment, the three task forces crossed the border with TF 318 attacking west along Route 1 and TF 333 and TF 225 attacking southwest.[542]

Over the next two days, the three task forces successfully accomplished their objectives against heavy resistance, although taking heavy casualties against from well-

[542] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 56.

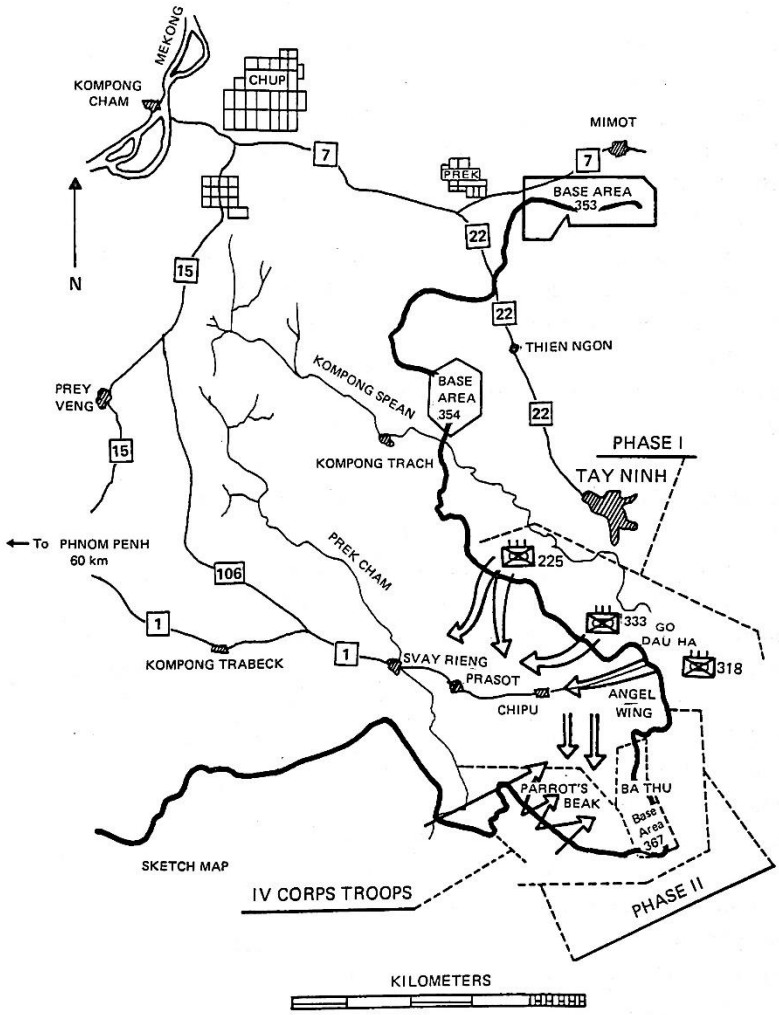

Figure 12: Toan Thang 42 – Phases I and II[543]

fortified and pre-warned PLAF defenders (the Toan Thang 41 raid had compromised any operational surprise). U.S. support for this phase included helicopter gunships and

[543] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 55.

gunship coordinators, command and command and control helicopters and artillery support.[544]

After two days of heavy fighting, the attack paused on 1 May, while the task forces prepared for further operations. 3d ALC logistics units resupplied the combat forces and two infantry battalions from the 48th and 52d infantry regiments (4/48 and 3/52) replaced two of the attacking two battalions (51st Ranger and 3d Mobile Strike Force) that had suffered heavy casualties.[545]

From the start, armor-infantry integration proved challenging for the RVNAF (and would remain a challenge throughout the operation) – the more aggressive infantry, (including airborne and ranger forces) would charge ahead while the armored forces were often much less aggressive and stayed behind upon contact with the enemy. Consequently, the infantry incurred heavier casualties than necessary and heavier armored firepower was often unable to be used against the fortified defenders due to infantry forces spread out in front of them. RVNAF commanders also relied heavily on the readily available U.S. attack helicopters rather than using their calling for their own supporting light and medium artillery, although advisors were able to gradually reduce this reliance.[546] Despite these challenges in combined arms coordination, the task forces were still able to move rapidly and overwhelm the defenders, calling in artillery and

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[544] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," ANNEX A (Summary of Operations) Toan Thang 42 (29 April - 22 July); Tho, 37.
[545] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 56-57.
[546] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 56; "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex I (Army Aviation).

tactical airstrikes against points of heavy resistance. RVNAF casualties, prisoners, and captured material were immediately flown back to South Vietnam by VNAF helicopters.

On 2 May, Phase II – a joint operation between III and IV Corps against the Parrot's Beak – was launched. This was the largest operation conducted to date by the RVNAF and was lauded for its high level of coordination.[547] TF 318 continued to clear Route 1 west towards the Cambodian provincial capital of Svay Rieng to allow for the repatriation of Vietnamese residents fleeing the violence deeper in Cambodia. Meanwhile, the other two III Corps task forces turned south, while four armor-infantry task forces under the personal command of IV Corps commander LTG Thanh attacked north.[548] The IV Corps task forces – drawn from infantry and artillery battalions from the 9th Division, five armored cavalry squadrons, and the 4th Ranger Group – moved north on three separate axes of advance to link up with III Corps. This southern attack was supported by artillery battalions that LTG Thanh had placed within each task force as well as the U.S. 23d artillery group.[549]

The largest operation conducted to date by the RVNAF, Phase II of Toan Thang 42 was also the best coordinated.[550] Moving to pre-designated objectives, task forces enveloped their targets after preparatory artillery fire. For the next two days these task forces conducted search and destroy operations in heavy contact with defending PAVN forces. They inflicted severe losses on the enemy (over 1000 killed) and seized over 100 tons of ammunition and weapons. On 5 May, the IV Corps forces task forces withdrew

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[547] Vien, "Leadership," 301.
[548] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 57.
[549] Vien, "Leadership," 301; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 57.
[550] Vien,"Leadership," 301.

south back into South Vietnam to refit for follow-on operations, while TF 225 and TF 333 withdrew north to link up with TF 318 and refit along Route 1. CIDG and Regional Force units from Tay Ninh province backfilled the ARVN forces to continue searching for enemy supply caches while the U.S. 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division provided security.[551]

While the clearing operations of Phase II were being conducted, Cambodian-RVNAF coordination and cooperation had begun. On 3 May, LTG Tri met with the commander of Cambodia's 1st Military Region to discuss the status of Vietnamese refugees and Cambodian request for assistance in clearing North Vietnamese forces along Route 1 – a task beyond the capabilities of the fledgling Cambodian Army. Subsequent to the meeting, the Cambodians agreed to release and assist the repatriation of Vietnamese being detained by the Cambodian government in camps in Svay Rieng province while coordination between the two militaries increased.[552]

With North Vietnamese installations and supply caches heavily damaged, the third phase of Toan Thang 42 began on 7 May with the III Corps task forces attacking north from Svay Rieng towards the Cambodian town of Kompong Trach. While TF 318 attacked directly north, TF 225 pulled back into South Vietnam, moved north, and then attacked west from the border. U.S. and Vietnamese Navy riverine vessels conducted operations along the Kompong Spean river to the north to seal off the objective, while TF 333 remained in reserve back to the south along Route 1. After defeating enemy

[551] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 59.
[552] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 58.

resistance (over 180 killed), the two task forces cleared enemy supply caches and installations around Kompong Trach, including a 200 bed hospital until 11 May. [553]

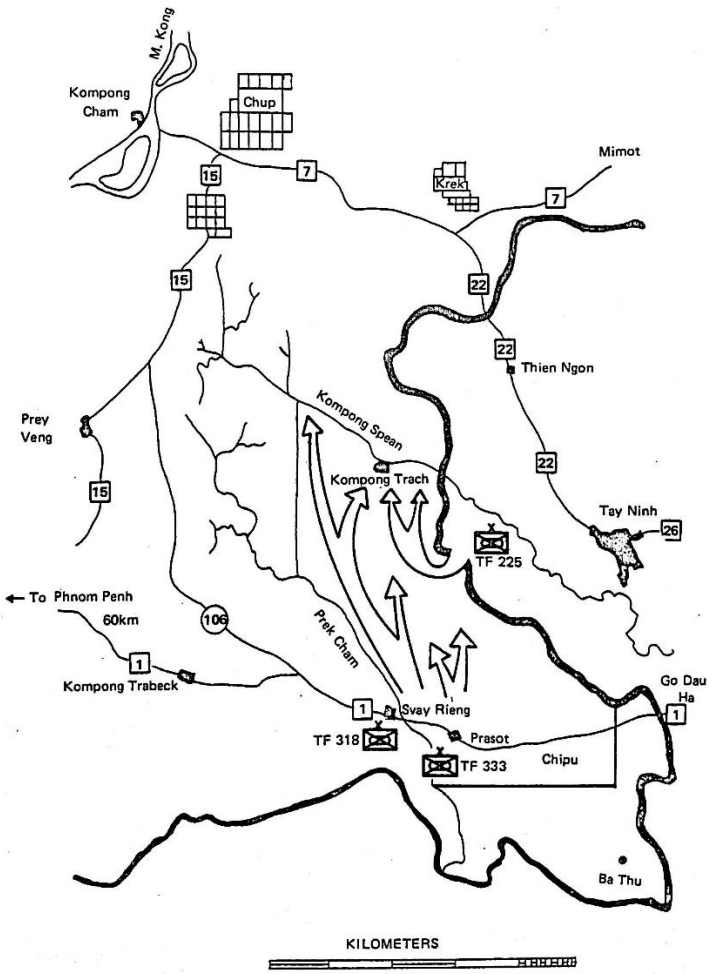

Figure 13: Toan Thang 42 – Phase III[554]

[553] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 61-62.
[554] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 61

On 11 May, President Thieu and Vice President Thieu visited the III Corps units in the field and, due to concerns with the increasing mistreatment of Vietnamese civilians in Cambodia's capital of Phomh Penh to the west, redirected III Corps to redirect their efforts back to the south and clear evacuation routes further west along Route 1. [555]

III and IV Corps Attack West to the Mekong River

Accordingly, Phase IV was launched on 13 May. Task Forces 318 and 225 withdrew back south to Route 1 to rejoin Task Force 333. Task Force 318 cleared the thirety-six kilometer route west from Svay Rieng to Kompong Trabeck and linked up with elements from IV Corps conducting operations north along the Mekong River. TF 333 conducted clearing operations north of Route 1 – engaging and displacing elements of a Tay Ninh local force PLAF battalion on 14 May and from a PAVN battalion of the 9th Division on 20 May. TF 225 cleared along the south of route 1 – engaging and displacing elements of a PLAF main force battalion. Meanwhile, two groups of Tay Ninh regional force companies backfilled the III Corps units and assumed the mission of maintaining security along Route 1 from the border to Svay Rieng.[556]

[555] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 62.
[556] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex A-2; Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion,* 62.

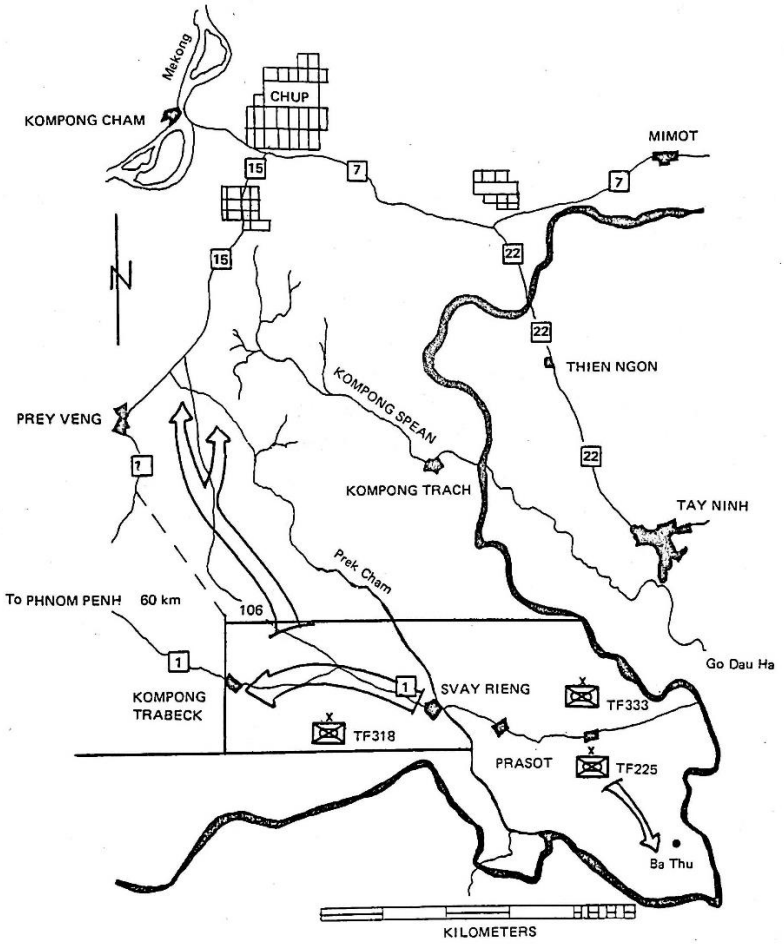

Figure 14: Toan Thang 42 – Phase IV[557]

While Toan Thang Phase III was ongoing, farther northwest and across the Mekong River, the lightly equipped and poorly trained Cambodian Army defenders of Kompong Cham, Cambodia's third largest city and headquarters for their Military Region 1, had been under increasing attack by the PAVN's 9th Division since 12 May.[558] During the clearing of Route 1 to Kompong Trabek, LTG Tri had unsuccessfully sought IV

[557] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 63.
[558] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 65.

Corps assistance for a joint attack north to relieve the pressure on Kompong Cham (LTG Tranh was consumed with clearing along the Mekong River and unable to divert additional forces to assist Tri). Unable to give immediate ground assistance, Tri had sent a liaison team and coordinated for VNAF air support for the besieged Cambodians.[559]

The Attack Continues Without U.S. Advisors

With Route 1 considered as cleared by 22 May, III Corps was assigned the mission to relieve Kompong Cham.[560] As this mission was beyond the 30 kilometer limit, RVNAF units operated without their U.S. advisors. On 23 May, Toan Thang Phase V began, seeking first to clear the PAVN 9th Division from the Chup Plantation area northeast of Kompong Cham. TF 318 travelled north from Kompong Trabek along Cambodian roads and then attacked along Route 15 towards the Chup plantation while TF 333 moved back into South Vietnam and travelled north before recrossing the border and attacking west into the plantation along Route 7. In a week of heavy fighting, the two-pronged attack, ranger and armor battalions from TF 318 and armor and airborne forces from TF 333 cleared the plantation of PAVN defenders.[561]

While the other two task forces cleared the Chup plantation, approximately 150 kilometers to the south, Task Force 225 and the Tay Ninh CIDG and Regional Force companies conducted clearing operations in the Angel's Wing border region of Cambodia north of Route 1. On the 28th of May supported by friendly artillery and both U.S. airstrikes and helicopter gunships and VNAF airstrikes, TF 225 came into heavy

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[559] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 64.
[560] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex A-2; Tho, 64-65.
[561] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 67.

contact with one of the remaining pockets of PAVN in the area. Although successful in clearing these defenders, “one VNAF Skyraider, one U.S. F100 and one Cobra gunship” were downed.[562]

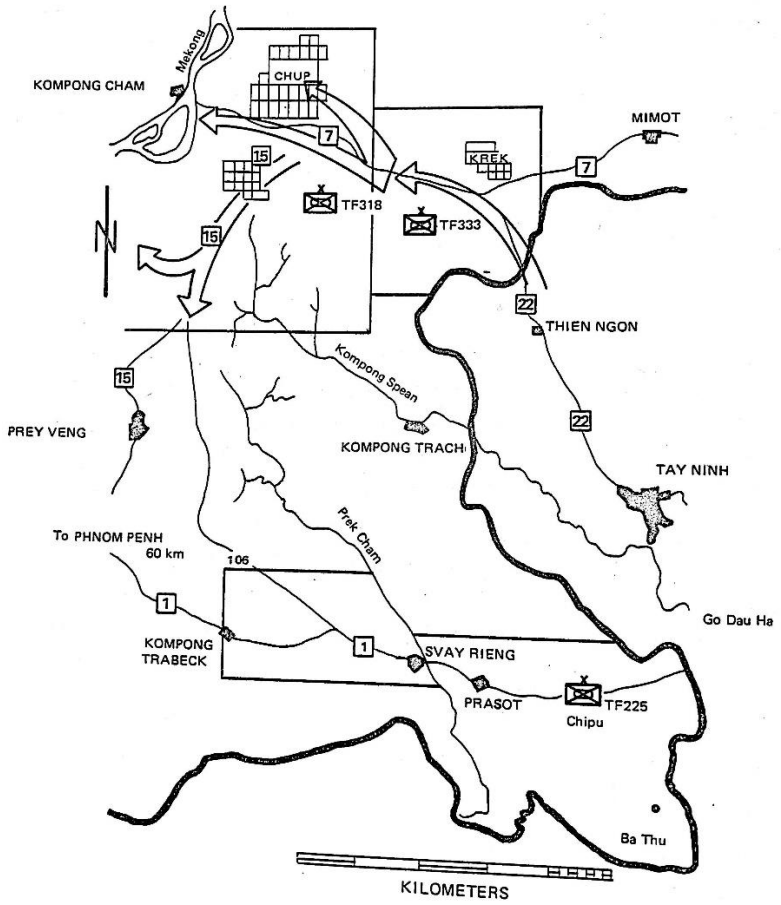

Figure 15 : Toan Thang 42 – Phase V (Final Phase) [563]

[562] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 67.
[563] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 66.

Subsequent to clearing the Chup plantation, TF 318 rotated back to South Vietnam on 3 June to rest and refit for a week while TF 333 continued searching for enemy supply caches east of the planation. On 12 June, TF 318 in turn relieved TF 333 and continued clearing east of the plantation around the town of Krek. However, the PAVN 9th Division soon took advantage of this reduction in pressure and moved back south into the Plantation and resumed its attacks on Kompong Cham[564]

To again relieve the city, III Corps moved all three task forces to Krek and they attacked west to re-clear the plantation on 21 June. Over six days they again defeated the 9th PAVN division elements in the plantation, clearing pressure and ending North Vietnamese assault on the city. This ended the operation. Although U.S. forces were withdrawn from Cambodia on 30 June, President Thieu had earlier decided in a 19 June conference with all four of his corps commanders to continue operations in Cambodia and III Corps forces would continue to operate in the area throughout the rest of the war.[565]

Analysis

Toan Thang 42 shows the impact of strong commanders and units that had benefitted from partnered operations, as well as attempts to RVNAF command and control systems to promote tactical flexibility. Multiple types of RVNAF elements participated in the operation and worked effectively together – ARVN infantry, mechanized and artillery units, Rangers, Airborne, VNAF helicopters and strike aircraft,

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[564] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 68.
[565] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 68-69.

territorial forces and even the Vietnamese Navy's riverine forces. Although advisors were present for much, although not all of the operation, Toan Thang 42 showed that South Vietnam did possess increasingly competent combat forces able to successfully conduct independent large-scale offensive operations – when under strong leadership. If South Vietnam was going to have a chance to stand on its own two feet against the North, this was the sort of action to build upon. Both the III and IV Corps commanders worked around poor leadership at the division level with the adept use of brigade-sized combined arms task forces.

The key element to success for both III and IV Corps was strong senior leadership. MACV Deputy Commander LTG Bill Rosson praised Tri as "a damn fine commander…[whose] idea was to get up where the action was."[566] Thanh's performance was similarly highly regarded, with MACV Commander GEN Abrams appraising his role in the Cambodian incursion by stating "[t]he handling of the forces…in IV Corps can only be described as brilliant."[567] The integration of combined arms task forces by both Tri and Thanh as well as Tri's use of Regional Forces as follow-on forces in an offensive cross-border roll represent significant innovations not seen before in RVNAF operations. Most importantly, they used their presence to successfully maintain momentum and aggressive operations by their subordinate elements.

Strong, capable leaders were beginning to rise to prominence and were gaining the opportunity to make a name for themselves. The RVNAF system was beginning to

[566] Sorley, 211.
[567] Sorley, 210.

change and favor more effective commanders. Certainly Tri was politically connected and Thanh was not perceived as a threat. The difference versus the previous system, however, was that competence was no longer an impediment to promotion – a potentially monumental change which could eventually have made a significant impact as a new generation continued to rise through the ranks to senior levels. Such changes in senior leadership take time, however – a commodity that South Vietnam would, unfortunately, ultimately not possess…

Towards the end of the operation, LTG Thanh was killed when his command helicopter collided with a US Cobra gunship in bad weather. The loss of this aggressive commander was a huge blow to the RVNAF. A year later LTG Tri would die from a similar helicopter accident – the loss of two experienced and aggressive senior commanders was a tremendous shock to the RFNAF and in a force with such a limited pool of capable leadership at its senior levels, one with lasting effects from which they never recovered.[568]

The combined arms task force concept used by both III and IV Corps was a particularly novel concept for the South Vietnamese. Thanh's IV Corps task forces had embedded artillery in addition to mechanized and infantry units. In terms of combined arms warfare this a natural evolution that had been demonstrated in numerous cases by other militaries in other conflicts. However, this was a relatively new concept for RVNAF commanders to use their forces in this way. Although – as discussed above – ARVN armored forces were less aggressive than their light infantry counterparts and

[568] Vien, "Leadership," 302.

coordination was still developing, overall these this was a major step forward for the South Vietnamese. These combined arms forces were able to move rapidly and take advantage of the firepower gained from their mechanized elements against the enemy.

The general weakness of division headquarters remained a challenge for Vietnamese commanders through the remainder of the war. Although not ideal, Tri and Thanh's model proved an acceptable work-around for smaller operations. Successive III and IV Corps commander such as LTG Minh in III Corps and LTG Truong in IV Corps made limited use of regimental or smaller task forces for offensive operations both within South Vietnam and across the border in Cambodia the next year in 1971. In this way they could bypass more marginal division commanders and staffs and give command to the small pool of better field grade officers at regimental level and below.[569]

Although armor and infantry forces were used again in limited fashion by the RVNAF, they would never be used so effectively and with such an integrated command structure as occurred during this series of operations in 1970. One could surmise that if Tri and Thanh had been in command in future RFNAF operations that they would have again used these task force structures and achieved similar levels of overall effectiveness. In such a case this might have become a normal part of RVNAF doctrine and would have been a major step towards improving the overall difficulty that the South Vietnamese had with fighting as combined arms teams.

The downside of the combined arms task force concept as applied in III and IV Corps was the micro-management of operations by these two corps commanders. While

[569] Clarke, 479.

the 9th Division commander did take part in IV Corps operations, he did so as GEN Thanh's deputy, not as the primary commander responsible for directing the operations of his subordinate units. In III Corps, the 25th Division commander was even more cut out of the command relationship by LTG Tri and did not have a major role in the operation. Tri and Thanh's personal involvement and their ability to direct operations for the task forces executing each phase of the operation was recognized as a key factor in maintaining the momentum that was critical to operational success.[570] But these two corps level commanders accomplished this by micromanaging operations which were broken down into a series of smaller pieces that never involved much more than a dozen ARVN battalions in Cambodia at any one time.[571]

Neither commander could have run multiple simultaneous operations in this way – as was being done in the U.S. II Field Force to their north where multiple simultaneous division-level and subordinate operations were being conducted by their own commands under the overall direction of LTG Davison. The division and corps staffs that could have provided the continuity to maintain several different simultaneous thrusts were left out of the picture and lost a crucial opportunity to improve their capabilities. Additionally, the ARVN division staffs did not gain the necessary experience to use in future operations since they essentially remained on the sidelines. Without the opportunity to exercise the command and control systems necessary to manage violence, the subsequent loss of these

[570] Vien, "Leadership," 301,
[571] Clarke, 424.

two commanders in air accidents was magnified by the heavily centralized and personality-dependent nature of ARVN command and control.

The III Corps commander and his key units benefitted from the close partnership that had been established in his sector with the supporting U.S. II Field Force units under the Dong Tien (Progress Forward) program. Although the benefits of this program were focused on certain particular ARVN units, this provided LTG Tri with a small pool of more effective units which he could rely on to fill his task forces for this cross-border operation. This partnership and the closer working relationship that it had helped foster between the III Corps headquarters and II Field Force also enabled U.S. liaison teams to integrate into the RVNAF headquarters and provide effective U.S. support for the operation.[572] What the III and IV Corps units had not experienced, however, was the requirement for combined arms coordination, directing the use of their own fire support (as opposed to relying on American support), and supplying forces in continual combat. Nevertheless, the supporting U.S. Field Force liaison teams noted that the RNVAF task forces and their supporting corps headquarters became more effective with these resources as operations continued and they developed experience in conducting major offensive operations.[573]

Although the operation relied extensively on U.S. aircraft and helicopter gunships, the South Vietnamese offensive also saw greater reliance on their own air and artillery support. Toan Thang 41 and the other limited cross border raids which

[572] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," 2.
[573] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," 8.

proceeded Toan Thang 42 were conducted solely with South Vietnamese air and artillery support due to restrictions on U.S. cross-border operations. Toan Thang 42 relied upon both U.S. and RVNAF artillery and air support. South Vietnamese artillery was coordinated and controlled through their own headquarters, while U.S. artillery support was controlled by the 23d Artillery group elements working out of the III Corps tactical operations center. This close supporting relationship, likely benefitting from the partnered operations III Corps-II Field Force operations in the previous year, worked smoothly and provided effective support that maintained the RVNAF operations.[574] After the main operation (Toan Thang 42) started, these assets were still relied upon extensively, although the VNAF air support was coordinated through a largely U.S. run fire control system.

Another major success in Toan Thang 42 was the successful coordination of Regional Forces into offensive operations. Benefitting from the increased training received over the last several years, the RF in the operation played an important role. On multiple occasions, the ARVN task forces were able to hand over control of key areas to these territorial forces which then continued to hold them and continue destruction of PAVN logistics nodes with only nominal ARVN assistance, allowing the regular forces to maintain their forward progress.[575]

Throughout the operation, ARVN armored forces performed less effectively overall than their light infantry counterparts. As with the earlier poor performance of the

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[574] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," Annex G (Artillery).
[575] "II Field Force Vietnam Commanders' Evaluation Report – Cambodian Operations," 2.

7th Armored Cavalry in the battle of Hue, ARVN armor commanders and their units were not used to operating in an offensive role. The problems in this operation were not as drastic as the ambush of the 7th Armored Cavalry, but nevertheless ARVN armor failed to contribute the heavy firepower which they should have, and their infantry peers instead relied on close air support or artillery in its place. As with their peers in Hue, ARVN armor lacked experience or other comparable training experiences, reflecting what appears to be an overall lack of previous combined arms maneuver training across that would have developed the familiarity and understanding of their respective strengths that would have allowed these forces to work more effectively together.

Additionally, while the task forces were able to maintain momentum by rotating subordinate infantry battalions in and out as they suffered casualties or for general rest and recuperation, they could not do the same for their much smaller pool of mechanized forces. This placed a heavy strain on the ARVN logistics system, although it was able to rely to a degree on additional support from U.S. mechanics.[576]

In evaluating these operations, we can evaluate the various III and IV Corps task forces as possessing Combined Arms/Joint Proficiency. They integrated all Ranger, Airborne, regular ARVN infantry and mechanized forces (and in the case of the IV Corps task forces, their own organic artillery) into an effective offensive force. They rotated replacement battalions into these structures with no loss of continuity and also effectively utilized combat air support when necessary. The Regional and CIDG forces – utilized in a cross-border offensive role for the first time, demonstrated Basic Proficiency and

[576] Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, 269.

performed well in their task of holding and searching recently cleared areas (and the III Corps in using them demonstrated joint combined arms). The various armored forces in general lacked Basic Proficiency – they should have been the fastest moving and hardest hitting of the task force elements, rather than the other way around.

The expanding VNAF had a significant role in this cross-border operation. VNAF fighters contributed approximately half of tactical airstrike sorties in support of Toan Thang 42 and VNAF fixed wing transport provided almost eighty percent of the supporting logistics flights.[577] This was critical experience that would pay off for the VNAF as they continued to expand. Although the VNAF fighter wings remained a relatively small force, the experience gained in these operations helped make them an effective and reliable element in future operations in which they participated.

As mentioned earlier, Vietnamese FACs also participated in this operation, although they were assigned the much simpler roles of directing pre-planned airstrikes. Assigning the VNAF personnel these much simpler and highly orchestrated actions was likely done out of an effort to prioritize efficiency by giving the more numerous and much more experienced American FACS the more complicated tasks. VNAF FACs did end up supporting Cambodian forces in combat against the PAVN later in the operation, but these operations were limited.[578] This was a crucial opportunity lost that would hurt the RVNAF down the road when they were forced much more heavily on their still inexperienced FACs in later years.

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[577] Folkman, Jr and Cain, 27.
[578] Folkman, Jr and Cain, 39.

Overall, Toan Thang 42 saw the RVNAF succeed in a new role – an offensive cross-border operation taking the fight to enemy sanctuaries and logistics nodes. Although the threat had been comparatively light – the PAVN defenders were caught off guard by the coup and the need to fight both the small and poorly equipped Cambodian Army as well as the first major cross-border operation from South Vietnam into its previously inviolate sanctuary – this was a major step forward for the RVNAF. South Vietnamese forces would continue cross-border operations into Cambodia through the 1973 cease-fire, continuing to disrupt this sanctuary. The South Vietnamese had shown that strong leaders could drive offensive operations and that their forces were capable of effective combined arms integration. But lingering issues remained. These combined arms task forces masked continuing shortfalls in division commanders and their staffs. Their armored forces remained a problem. Finally, although the VNAF and supporting artillery had performed effectively, they still operated as part of a largely U.S. run, rather than Vietnamese-run system. These issues would continue to plague the RVNAF as they embarked upon even more ambitious operations in the following year.

Exemplar Battle 2: Operation Lam Son 719 (1971)

US Security Forces Committed: **Yes**
Primacy of US Combat Force Mission to: **Partnering**
Advisors down to what level: **Division and Corps Staff (no advisors on the ground in Laos)**

From 8 February to 6 April, 1971 the RVNAF launched a corps level cross-border operation into Laos designed to preempt what was perceived as an imminent multi-

division invasion of Military Region 1, destroy critical North Vietnamese logistic nodes and throw off future operations for another year. For the first time, the entire operation was conducted without any U.S. advisors, making it a critical test of Vietnamization. Conducted in extremely difficult terrain against a determined enemy prepared to take heavy losses, Lam Son 719 would have been a challenging operation for any military. The operation involved conventional combined arms operations with both sides using tanks and artillery alongside their infantry. However, although the operation achieved a number of its objectives and caused heavy casualties against a number of PAVN divisions, it was an extremely ugly affair that demonstrated significant weaknesses in command and control and the ability to execute combined arms warfare and was not the clear RVNAF victory that had been desired.

The Situation

Although U.S. intervention into Cambodia had been limited by Congress by late 1970, the Nixon administration and senior U.S. military commanders assessed that cross-border operations had kept the North Vietnamese off balance and were continuing new attacks to maintain their momentum. The 1970 coup in Cambodia and subsequent South Vietnamese and U.S. operations had deprived North Vietnam of its sea supply route through the port of Kompong Song making the Ho Cho Minh Trail critical for the North to sustain its operations against South Vietnam.[579] When intelligence reports in October and November indicated that the North Vietnamese were preparing for a multi-division level corps-level operation into MR-1 with a scale comparable to the Tet 1968 offensive,

[579] Loye Jr., et al., 22.

President Nixon and National Security Advisor Kissinger sought to preempt the enemy with cross-border operations of their own.[580] Another driving factor was the decreasing U.S. military presence in South Vietnam. Senior leaders in Washington assessed that early 1971 was the last time when the U.S. would still retain enough combat power to provide significant support for cross-border operations.

Admiral McCain at Pacific Command and GEN Abrams at MACV were directed to prepare concepts for the President for multi-division South Vietnamese operations into Cambodia and Laos. Simultaneously, Abrams and Ambassador Bunker were to consult with President Thieu and gain his support for the operations.[581]

Gen Abrams had his XXIV Corps (the U.S. Army element which had replaced the U.S. III Marine Amphibious Force previously operating in the I Corps area) commander, LTG James Sutherland draw up a concept for the Laotian operation. Abrams and the JGS already had an existing plan for Cambodia which involved expansion of the ongoing RVNAF operations near the Chup plantation. On 13 May, both plans were presented to President Thieu and GEN Vien by GEN Abrams, Ambassador Bunker, and BG Al Haig, President Nixon's representative. After discussion, Abrams, Bunker and Thieu favored the bolder choice – a decisive blow to sever the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and a supporting attack into Cambodia.[582]

From 1965 onward, U.S. military leader in Washington and Saigon and JGS chief GEN Vien had desired to sever the Ho Chi Minh trail logistics corridor by either raiding

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[580] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 320-321.
[581] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*,321-322.
[582] Willibanks, 33.

or establishing a permanent cordon across southern Laos.[583] GEN Westmoreland had directed his staff to draw up numerous proposals for incursions against this region, including several running along Highway 9 west from South Vietnam's northernmost Quang Tri province towards the town of Tchpone in Laos – the route for LTG Sutherland's planned operation. However, each time the US Ambassador in Laos had objected to these planned operations and neither GEN Westmoreland or ADM Sharp had pushed this further. Later, Sharp had indicated in early 1968 that such an operation into a critical area so close to North Vietnam would run into heavy resistance on very defensible terrain with a high chance for "abnormally high" allied casualties.[584] This was a very prescient observation.

The area where the subsequent offensive would take place presented difficult terrain for offensive operations, the North Vietnamese had operated there for years, and it was close to their lines of communication into North Vietnam. Route 9 was a single-lane road running forty-five kilometers west along the north side of the Xe Pon river from the South Vietnamese border to Tchepone. Steep escarpments overlooked the road, with a narrow 2-4 kilometer wide valley in between, through which the road and the river ran. The entire area was covered with heavy vegetation and very hilly, presenting only limited opportunities for helicopter landing zones. Finally, the weather during the Feb-May

[583] Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, Indochina Monographs Series (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 33-34; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 324.
[584] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 324-325.

period when the operation was scheduled was intermittently rainy and generally with a heavy cloud cover except during 4-6 hours in the middle of the day.[585]

The Plan (host nation and patron)

LTG Sutherland's concept for the operation involved a two-division force of RVNAF spearheaded by an armored brigade attacking west along Route 9 (as in many of the previous U.S. plans) to sever the Ho Chi Minh trail at Tchepone. U.S. forces would establish a forward support base at the site of the former USMC base in Khe Sanh along the Laotian border in western Quang Tri province. The U.S. was prevented from any ground role in Laos, but would provide supporting air support, airlift, and long range artillery fire.[586] Sutherland emphasized that rapid execution was essential for success and that despite the difficult terrain, the ARVN must be able to move forward on the ground – depending solely on airlift would be subject to considerable enemy antiaircraft artillery near Tchepone and might jeopardize the operation. [587] The eventual plan would closely resemble this initial concept, with only slight South Vietnamese modifications and greater detail.

The operation would consist of four phases. The US would first establish a forward operating base and prepare to block enemy counterattacks across the demilitarized zone (DMZ). South Vietnamese armor would then rapidly advance down

[585] Willibanks, 38-39
[586] Willibanks, 32-33.
[587] Willibanks, 32-33.

Highway 9 to seize Tchephone with its flanks protected by air assaulting infantry. The RVNAF would then interdict the trail until the onset of the rainy season in May and use Tchepone as a base of operations and destroy North Vietnamese supply caches throughout Base Area 604, the area surrounding the town. Finally, the RVNAF would withdraw into South Vietnam – either back east along Highway 9, or southeast on a slightly longer route through the A Shau valley, destroying another North Vietnamese logistics area, Base Area 611, as it continued back to the border.[588]

Both sides were highly concerned with the potential for leaks and so only senior commanders and a very small number of senior staff at MACV, JGS, XXIV Corps, and I Corps headquarters were involved in planning. Throughout late December and early January U.S. and South Vietnamese planning was done in isolation from each other and between the different levels of South Vietnamese commands – to the detriment of joint coordination. In late January, the I Corps operations officer confronted his JGS counterpart who had just given an exclusive "eyes-only" concept briefing to LTG Lam and asked "[w]hy exclude me from the briefing? I have already developed the operational plan?"[589] Shortly afterwards, the U.S. XXIV Corps commander and his staff who were proceeding apace with their own separate planning for the U.S. and South Vietnamese portions also became aware of the parallel I Corps planning effort and the two allies finally began to work closely together on the details of the plan.[590]

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[588] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*,324; Loye Jr. et al, 3.
[589] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*,323; Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 34.
[590] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 34.

To augment its available strength, I Corps was assigned resources from South Vietnam's strategic reserve since it still had to maintain security over Military Region 1 during the operation. From its own organic resources, I Corps would use its veteran 1st Division and two of its regiments, the 1st Ranger Group (a regimental sized force with three battalions) and the 1st Armor Brigade (with two cavalry squadrons of M41 light tanks and M113 APCs). The Airborne Division with its headquarters and three regiments would be the main effort for the operation. Two marine brigades, the 258th (which was already operating in Quang Tri province) and 147th would serve as the Corps reserve and the Marine Division headquarters and its additional brigade would be available if necessary.[591]

Although U.S. ground combat units and advisors were prevented by Congress from moving forward into Laos, the U.S. would provide extensive support for the operation. The 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) would cover the area south of the DMZ and the remainder of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces along with the ARVN 1st Division's 2d regiment, thereby allowing the rest of the 1st Division to attack to the west. The 1st Brigade of the U.S. 5th Infantry Division would occupy the Khe Sanh area and support the onward movement of the I Corps units along with extensive long range Corps artillery (8inch and 175mm). Additionally, in perhaps the most vital requirement for the operation, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), augmented by attack and transport helicopter formations from throughout South Vietnam was tasked with

[591] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 35-39; Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 326-7.

providing helicopter support for aerial attack, transportation, and medical evacuation.[592] In addition to additional aircraft, the 101st was given "the highest priority and massive support by United States Army, Vietnam" in the form of logistics, maintenance and replacements" to allow it to maintain a continuous and unprecedented level of activity.[593]

Once the border was secured by U.S. forces, the final plan called for a three-pronged attack down Route 9 to seize Tchepone and begin disrupting North Vietnamese logistics. An airborne-armor task force consisting of the Airborne Division's 1st Brigade, 44th Artillery Brigade, and its 101st Engineer battalion along with the two armored cavalry squadrons would advance down route 9 and repair the road as it moved to link up with other heliborne units of the Airborne Division that would air assault in front of it. Linkup would occur near Landing Zone (LZ) A Luoi, twenty kilometers deep in Laos at the village of Ban Dong. The three Ranger battalions would air assault in and occupy blocking positions to the north and the 1st and 3d regiments of the 1st Infantry division would air assault in and occupy blocking positions to the south. After linkup at A Luoi, the Airborne Division's 2d Brigade would air assault the last 20+ kilometers to seize Tchepone, while the armor infantry task force again continued down the road to again link up.[594]

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[592] 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), *Airmobile Operations in Support of Operation LAMSON 719: 8 February – 6 April 1971, Volume II*, (1 May 1971), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/ repositories/2/digital_objects/626188, I-2; Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 45.
[593] 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile). *Final Report: Airmobile Operations in Support of Operation LAMSON 719: 8 February – 6 April 1971, Volume I*, (1 May 1971) Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu. edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/626123, I-19.
[594] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 35-36, 38; Willibanks 42-43.

Both U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders were aware that the North Vietnamese had extensive forces in the target area, including at least three infantry regiments and hundreds of antiaircraft weapons of various types. They also knew that the area could be rapidly reinforced from North Vietnam and by late January GEN Abrams and LTG Sutherland knew that the North Vietnamese were probably aware of the attack due to RVNAF security lapses. Despite this, GEN Abrams was confident of the operation's success and informed President Thieu on 29 and 30 January that the RVNAF assault should be able to reach Tchepone in one or two days after crossing the border. Additionally, Abrams informed the South Vietnamese president that he did not anticipate the North Vietnamese being able to reinforce the area with major forces until after the operation's first three weeks.[595] In truth, Abrams knew that he was sending the South Vietnamese into a much more hostile environment than in Cambodia, but was counting on U.S. B-52 strikes, tactical air support, and helicopter-provided mobility to even the odds. He was gambling that this could present a major setback to the North Vietnamese and a major boost for the South Vietnamese to validate and propel further gains in Vietnamization.

Command and Control

LTG Sutherland and LTG Lam planned to direct the battle from from forward command posts that would be established at (respectively) Quang Tri and Dong Ha.[596]

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[595] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 326.
[596] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 326.

Although these headquarters were a short ride away from each other they were not integrated and relied on liaison officers to facilitate the exchange of information.

Until now, RVNAF forces normally obtained fire support by requesting it through their American advisors, but with no Americans moving forward on the ground into Laos, new processes were required. U.S. forward air control (FAC) aircraft were each assigned English-speaking Vietnamese observers to assist in coordination with RVNAF ground elements. Additionally, I Corps decided to locate all of the division tactical operations centers (DTOCS - command posts) near Khe Sanh rather than across the border with their subordinate brigades in Laos so that they could benefit from having U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force liaison elements assigned to each of these command posts. Requests for immediate air support would be radioed from the unit in contact up through command channels to the DTOC and then from the USAF liaison either back to their control element in Danang or to FACs near the unit in contact (if they hadn't been contacted directly by the unit in contact in the first place). Similarly, requests for U.S. Army rather than RVNAF artillery would go through the divisional U.S. Army liaisons.[597]

Adding to the challenge of coordination was an internal U.S. complication. Rather than using the Air Force FACs who normally worked with the 101st, the operation was supported by a different set of USAF "out of country" FACs, who were used to flying in Laos in support of classified special forces operations but not in support of ground and

[597] Loye Jr, et al., 30-31.

airmobile operations. As the operation progressed these units became more accustomed to operating with each other, but this was a challenge at the beginning[598]

Although the units in the strategic reserve were generally considered among South Vietnam's elite units, their division headquarters were used to serving as administrative rather than combat headquarters and their subordinate units were only used to brigade and battalion-level operations. Neither the Airborne or Marine Division had ever functioned as a separate division commanding multiple brigades – heretofore they had always parceled out their units to others rather than leading them. Their commanders and staffs were not used to working together or in general to controlling these forces in battle and none of the units or their leaders had experience in large scale maneuver warfare.[599]

Even more concerning than Airborne and Marine Division inexperience were weaknesses within I Corps – responsible for operational command of Lam Son 719. LTG Lam and his staff had never worked from a field command post – they had always run previous operations from the fixed corps headquarters in Danang. LTG Lam and his staff had also never developed the processes to control subordinate elements in combat. Since the two division sectors in the Corps area – 1st and 2d Division – had been separated by an intervening terrain feature, Hai Van Pass, they had each been left largely to run their own operations – one in the north of the corps sector and one in the south. Instead of their normal purely administrative duties, LTG Lam and his headquarters were now required

[598] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL I, I-3.
[599] Willbanks, 55.

to execute an entirely different set of processes for an operation which some senior U.S. advisors didn't feel they truly understood.[600]

Alongside this lack of experience was the tense relationship between the senior commanders of the operation. As national strategic reserve units, the Airborne and Marine Division commanders normally answered only to President Thieu and the JGS. Despite being division commanders on paper, both the Airborne Division commander, Du Quoc Dong and his Marine Division counterpart, Le Nguyen Khang were lieutenant generals and Khang actually outranked Lam. Neither were happy to be subordinated to LTG Lam, especially LTG Khang, who had been critical of the plan from the outset. Perhaps annoyed that he had not been given overall command of the operation, Khang remained in Sanoi and left command of the Marine Division to his deputy, COL Bui Thi Lan.[601]

For the initial weeks of the operation, the various pieces of the battle functioned as just that – separate pieces rather than an integrated whole. A true combined tactical headquarters to integrate US and South Vietnamese operations did not occur until three weeks after RVNAF troops had crossed the border when a US-Vietnamese-high level staff was formed at the I Corps forward headquarters at Khe Sanh.[602] This greatly improved coordination of U.S. support for RVNAF operations, particularly, the airmobile operations.[603]

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[600] Sorley, 257.
[601] Willbanks, 55.
[602] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL II, I-2.
[603] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL I, I-3. 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL II, I-53.

Advisory Relationship

Although by this time RVNAF III Corps cross-border operations in Cambodia had now been operating for almost a year with no advisors, this was a first for I Corps or for any RVNAF operation of this scale or complexity. Some of the Airborne forces involved in the operation had gone without advisors for a short time in Operation Toan Thang 42. However, for the vast majority of the tactical units, the inability to rely on the assistance of U.S. advisors, particularly to integrate the wealth of U.S. assets on which they depended (and the VNAF was integrated into the USAF air coordination system for this and all other operations) was a new experience that would present a challenge. This operation in particular – with its extensive reliance on helicopter assets as the primary means for air transport and resupply – was extremely complex and would be exceptionally challenging for units that would be "on their own" for the first time. To assist with this complexity, the U.S. maintained a "senior commander aloft" – a senior commander – often the Assistant Division Commander of the 101st Airborne – separate from the ground and air missions coordinated all U.S. aviation resources and served as the defacto aviation officer to the I Corps Commander. Although on several occasions a senior South Vietnamese commander accompanied the Assistant Division Commander (seen as ideal by the 101st), this was not always the case.[604]

Nevertheless, since the Division tactical operations centers would remain on the South Vietnamese side of the border at Khe Sanh, U.S. advisors would still able to provide assistance to RVNAF staffs. Although the division senior advisors normally

[604] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL II, I-2.

responsible for advising RVNAF division commanders were not allowed to fly over southern Laos alongside their peers, they were allowed to have one member of each advisory team airborne over the respective areas of operations of the units that they advised.[605]

Conduct of the Operation

Early on the morning of 29 January 1971, the first phase of Lam Son 719 kicked off with American forces securing staging and assembly areas and clearing the route for the subsequent movement of RVNAF forces through northwestern Quang Tri province and into Laos. Tank and mechanized infantry companies from the 1st Brigade of the U.S. 5th Mechanized Infantry Division supported by engineers moved rapidly to clear the roads while another infantry battalion air assaulted to seize and repair the Khe Sanh airfield. On 1 February, American heavy artillery moved into place around Khe Sanh to cover the subsequent South Vietnamese offensive and armored cavalry moved to secure the border. The XXIV Corps (US) and I Corps (RVNAF) headquarters moved forward to establish their forward command posts in Quang Tri and Dong Ha on 29 January.[606]

Meanwhile, the RVNAF were simultaneously preparing for the offensive. The first combined operational meeting between U.S. and RVNAF commanders was held in the I Corps forward command post in Dong Ha on 2 February and all commanders were issued detailed orders. Over the course of the next several days the RVNAF units moved overland from Quang Tri and by air from Saigon to their assembly areas around Que

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[605] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 44.
[606] Willbanks, 70-72.

Sanh. Although poor weather from 4-7 February interfered with American cross-border airstrikes to prepare the target area in advance, LTG Lam refused LTG Sutherland's recommendations to delay the attack until for more adequate airstrikes. Lam was resistant to modifying the start date that he had been given by President Thieu, so the operation would proceed forward regardless, with the U.S. adding additional attack helicopter support for the initial assault.[607]

The RVNAF Cross the Border

At 10 am on 8 February, the RVNAF armor-airborne task force consisting of two cavalry squadrons, two airborne battalions, a combat engineer battalion and a platoon of bulldozers crossed the border into Laos, proceeded by U.S. helicopter gunships and Airborne division and U.S. artillery fire.[608] Route 9, which was essentially a dirt trail, was in poor condition with numerous washouts caused by rain and with craters and ditches dug by the North Vietnamese defenders. The heavy underbrush on each side of the road hampered the ability of the two airborne infantry battalions to screen the flanks of the armored column. The task force moved ten kilometers west before noon and remained there overnight while the repair crews attempted to improve the roads. While the armored column and its forward screen of attack helicopters received only sporadic

[607] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 61-64; Willbanks, 76.
[608] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 65

resistance, there was evidence of enemy armored vehicles from the outset – until now a relatively rare phenomenon.[609]

While the ground forces advanced down Route 9, a protective screen of firebases was established by seven Ranger, Airborne, and infantry battalions air assaulting to the north and south of Route 9. To the south, the 3d Regiment of the 1st Division air assaulted its 4th Battalion and regimental command post into LZ Hotel and its 1st and 2d Battalions into LZ Blue, eight

[609] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 65, Loye Jr. et al., 42.

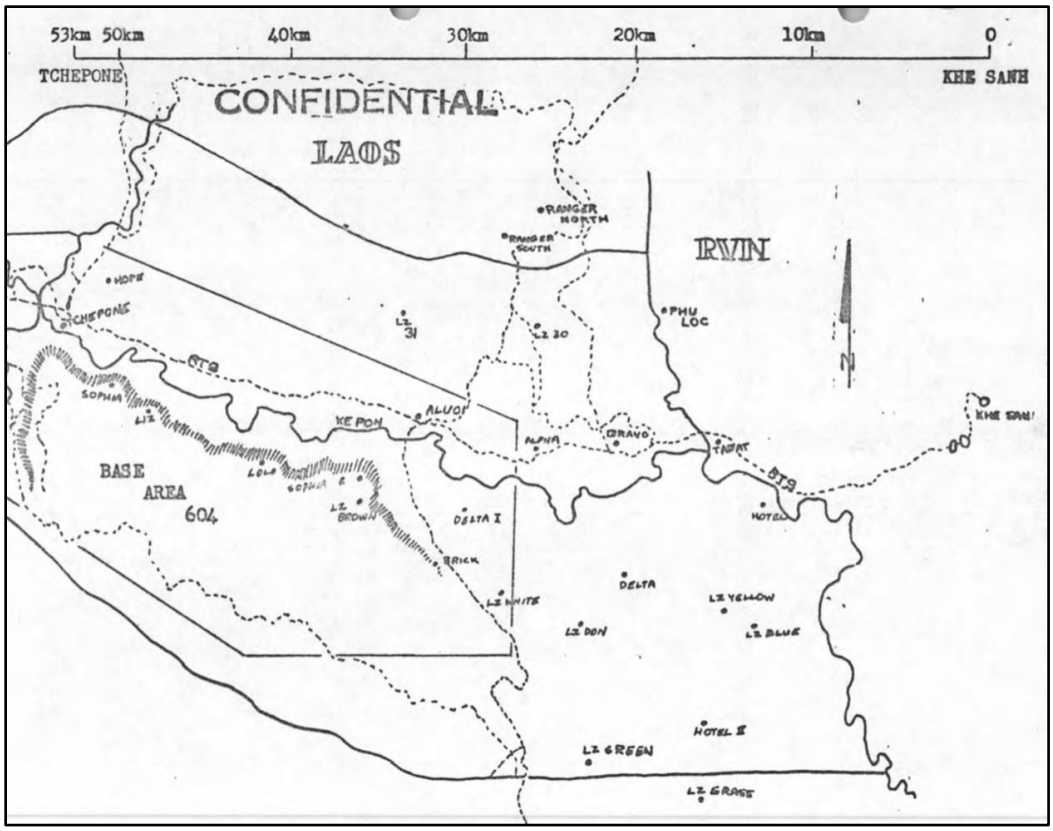

Figure 16: Lam Son 719 Area of Operations[610]

kilometers to the southeast. Its 3d Battalion was spread in company sized elements in Firebases Delta, Delta 1 and Don. To the northeast, the 1st Ranger Group headquarters and its 21st Battalion landed at what would eventually be called Ranger South. To the north, The 2d Airborne Battalion occupied Firebase 30, while the 3d Airborne Battalion, 3d Brigade headquarters, and a battery of 105mm artillery occupied Firebase 31. By the end of the day there were 6200 ARVN troops across the border into Laos.[611]

[610] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL I, I-4. "Figure 1.1. Area of Operations Lamson 719"
[611] Loye Jr. et al., 41; Willbanks, 77-81.

Most of the landings were met with intense anti-aircraft fire from heavy machine guns, but after the U.S. helicopter crews had landed the various battalions, they had all faced relatively minimal opposition and moved quickly to occupy their objectives. Each of the battalions began digging in and sending out patrols as soon as they arrived. While armored vehicles had been seen by U.S. helicopters near Ban Dong, there had been no engagements at this point. The first day ended with positive momentum for the assault.

Heavy rain on 9 February prevented any further planned air assaults, and severely hampered the ability of the ARVN engineers to improve the quagmire which Route 9 had become, however the ground force continued forward slowly. The armor task force advanced 5 kilometers while the flank security elements to the north continued to dig in and patrol their zones. A ranger patrol to the north called in an airstrike ON 3 tanks and other vehicles towing artillery pieces which they had observed, but the low ceiling prevented tactical air and U.S. helicopter gunships were unable to destroy the tanks. [612] The North Vietnamese had initially believed the entire the operation was an elaborate deception and Hanoi only decided on 9 February to order two divisions to converge on Route 9 from the north and south. For the time being the PAVN in the area largely sought to avoid contact and gathering their forces while until reinforcements arrived.[613]

On 10 February, the RVNAF heliborne and ground elements successfully linked up at their initial objective – Ban Dong. The weather cleared enough by late afternoon for the 9th Airborne Battalion to air assault into LZ A Luoi late in the afternoon and for the

[612] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 68; Loye Jr. et al., 43;
[613] Willbanks, 82.

1st ARVN Division's 4th Battalion of the 1st Infantry Brigade to move my air to Firebase Delta to the southeast. Both air assaults encountered heavy antiaircraft fire which initially delayed their landings, although U.S. fighter bombers and attack helicopters were able to successfully suppress the defenders and allow successful landings. Later that evening the advance elements of the armor task force reached Ban Dong. Linkup at the approximate midway point to Tchepone had been achieved on Day Three and advance elements of the armored task force reported that the next section of Route 9 was in good condition and much more trafficable than the first half.[614] The one major setback for the delay was when a flight of four VNAF helicopters headed to Ranger South was shot down by PAVN 37mm antiaircraft fire – killing the I Corps operations and logistics officers, a severe blow to LTG Lam's staff. The operations officer had been carrying a complete set of the operational plans for Lam Son 719 and it was feared that these documents might have been lost to the North Vietnamese when searches could not find the downed helicopters.[615]

An Unexplained Halt Leads to Defeat in Detail

On 11 February, having incurred only minor contact, with his flanks secure and with his ground force prepared to advance the final twenty kilometers to Tchepone, LTG Lam suddenly became more cautious – a decision which would have colossally damaging implications. For the next several days, Lam held the armored task force at Ban Dong while he reinforced his flank defenses. Firebase Ranger North was established three

[614] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 68-69; Loye Jr. et al., 44; Willbanks 83-84.
[615] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 69; Willbanks, 84.

kilometers to the north, with the 21st Ranger Battalion moving in to help secure the initial sections of Route 9 from the north. The other firebases – each on high ground overlooking the surrounding terrain – were consolidated and reinforced. They each received batteries of their own artillery as well as light bulldozers to expand their fortifications.[616] Although they did not resume forward movement, the RVNAF did make an active effort in patrolling around their areas, where they found and destroyed numerous ammunition, fuel and storage areas throughout the area.[617] The North Vietnamese reinforcements now began to arrive in the area, however, and day by day ground attacks and mortar attacks against each of the firebases and on Ban Dong steadily became more intense as the RVNAF sat motionless and dug in.

One contributor to the dilemma was the personal intervention of President Thieu. On 12 February – a day after LTG Lam's mysterious halt, he was visited at his Dong Hah forward command post by Thieu, who directed him to be careful in his westward movement and to cancel the operation if casualties exceeded three thousand. Some have suggested that Thieu was concerned about the upcoming Fall national elections and the potential disaster that severe losses to the Airborne Division, his primary counter-coup force might represent in South Vietnam's still unstable political climate.[618]

Despite intense efforts from LTG Sutherland and GEN Abrams to lobby LTG Lam and GEN Vien to restart forward progress, the RVNAF forces arrayed in a loose rectangle around Route 9 remained stationary for the next two weeks as the North

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[616] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 68-69; Loye Jr. et al., 44;
[617] Loye, Jr. et al., 47.
[618] Cosmas, 332; Willbanks, 89-90.

Vietnamese increasingly sensed an opportunity for a major victory. On 15 February, Hanoi's politburo issued a cable stating that this "strategically important decisive battle…will have a political impact in South Vietnam, in the United States, and throughout the world."[619] The North Vietnamese had decided that the political and psychological gains in this campaign justified any sacrifice and through all available resources at the RVNAF in Southern Laos. Ultimately the NVA forces arrayed against Lam Son 719 included elements of five divisions, two separate infantry regiments, three tank battalions, eight artillery regiments, six anti-aircraft regiments, and eight sapper battalions.[620]

By the middle of the month, attacks began to focus increasingly on the north, particularly at Ranger North and South as the North Vietnamese attempted to cut the RVNAF off from their base of supply in South Vietnam. The three Ranger battalions were now facing an entire PAVN division – the newly arrived 308th PAVN Division. Although the two firebases were heavily supported by extensive support from tactical airstrikes, B-52 strikes, gunships and artillery, it was difficult to resupply them and the continuous attacks were wearing them down. Although the height of the RVNAF firebases gave them some advantages, it also made resupply difficult as the helicopters upon which the Rangers and other RVNAF firebases relied for resupply and medical evacuation were exposed the intense antiaircraft defenses that the PAVN pushed close around each firebase.[621]

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[619] Willbanks, 92.
[620] Willbanks, 69.
[621] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 76-79.

On 19 February President Thieu again visited I Corps Forward Headquarters at Dong Ha. The president was briefed on the Rangers' critical situation and LTG Lam informed him that pushing forward towards Tchepone with the Airborne Division would be highly questionable. In response, Thieu directed LTG Lam and his division commanders (also present) to take their time and that it might be better to expand search activities to the southwest rather than pressing forward. [622] Despite Thieu's admonition, time was not on the RVNAF's side and the firebases began to fall one by one under concerted PAVN pressure.

Despite taking heavy losses, the PAVN massed their efforts to isolate and overwhelm individual firebases. By 20 February, the 39th Ranger Battalion on Ranger North had withstood continuous attack from the 102d PAVN Regiment for two days. Although the PAVN had penetrated his outer defenses, the ground commander effectively utilized the U.S. artillery, gunships, and airstrikes against him – including having the gunships fire into his outer trenches when they were overrun. In dire straits by evening, however, the commander successfully exfiltrated the remnants of his battalion in good order with its weapons and equipment the three kilometers to Ranger South while under fire.[623] Despite losing the firebase with half of the battalion killed or wounded, it was estimated that the Rangers had rendered at least two PAVN battalions ineffective.[624]

The PAVN continued to press in the north. Rather than have another the 21st Ranger Battalion and remnants of the 39th suffer the same fate as Ranger North, they

[622] Hinh, 79.
[623] Loye, et al, 52.
[624] Willbanks, 99.

were extracted on 25 February. With first Ranger North and then Ranger South evacuated, the 3d Airborne Brigade in Firebases 30 and 31 now came under increasing pressure. The same day as the Rangers were extracted (25 February), the PAVN made an effort to overwhelm Firebase 31, with an attack that included heavy artillery and twenty tanks. Despite extensive artillery support and fixed wing airstrikes against the PAVN attackers, the Airborne defenders were unable to stop the PAVN T-54 tanks attacking directly up the slopes with their Light Antitank Weapons (LAWs). Although numerous paratroopers escaped, Firebase 31 was overrun and the brigade commander and artillery battalion commander were captured.[625]

One element that could have come to the aid of Firebase 31 was the 1st Armored Brigade, and despite orders from the Airborne Division commander to relieve the besieged tankers, the armored cavalry squadrons of the brigade did not move to aid the firebase. LTG Dong had ordered 1st Armor commander COL Luat to move tanks from his 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron to link up with two companies from the 3d Airborne Battalion who would lead them to the firebase. Despite being dispatched, however, the column of five M41 tanks and accompanying paratroopers halted south of the firebase and did not link up. U.S. advisors were later unclear of the cause of the confusion. The Airborne Division senior advisor argued that COL Luat ignored LTG Dong's orders as well as a subsequent order from LTG Lam. In constrast, the Armored Brigade advisor indicated that COL Luat had received contradictory orders from LTG Lam and LTG Dong and that the inexperienced Airborne Division staff had not followed up.

[625] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 84-85.

Regardless, the small task force did not exercise initiative and failed to reinforce the besieged firebase, which was subsequently overrun by the assault of PAVN tanks which terrified the Airborne defenders who were untrained in anti-armor tactics.[626]

Despite this poor performance, the armor-airborne task force partially redeemed itself in the next several days. The PAVN attack continued south from Firebase 30 right into the 17th Armored Cavalry Regiment and 8th Airborne Battalion, including the elements that had failed to reinforce Firebase 30 and the 2d Airborne remnants that had retreated to them. On 25 and 27 February and the night of 1 March, the task force fought three major battles with the 24th and 36th Regiments of the 208th PAVN Division, reinforced by the tanks of the 202d Tank Regiment.[627]

In this first battle between North and South Vietnamese tanks during the entire war, the RVNAF emerged victorious. The airborne and armored forces worked together to defeat the attacks and kill over 1000 PAVN soldiers while destroying seventeen PT-76 light tanks and six T-54 main battle tanks. In exchange, the combined arms task force lost only 27 dead, 185 wounded, and 3 M41 tanks, although their more lightly armored APCs took heavy losses and 25 were destroyed. [628]

The fact that the RVNAF defenses were fighting well individually, but largely as individual or multiple battalions rather than as a corps teams was not unnoticed by senior South Vietnamese leaders, including President Thieu. On the U.S. side, GEN Abrams had been repeatedly pressing Thieu for action not only on his own initiative but in response to

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[626] Willbanks, 106-107.
[627] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 84-85.
[628] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 84-85.

frantic calls from Washington. On 22 February, President Thieu selected III Corps commander LTG Do Cao Tri to immediately replace Lam, who was clearly not performing. Unfortunately, Tri was killed in a helicopter crash the next day while observing ongoing operations in Cambodia.[629] Tri had seemed much more competent and aggressive in 1970 operations in Cambodia, but whether he would have been able to reverse some of the damage occurring in Lam Son 719 will never be known.

Change of Mission

After three weeks of heavy fighting, mounting losses, and paralysis in forward momentum (the latter due partially to his own interfence), President Thieu intervened to change the operational objective and pull the battered Airborne Division from the fight. On 27 February, Thieu directed (against Abram's strong arguments to continue with the original objective) that Lam Son 719's goal would now be to purely seize Tchepone rather than to occupy and interdict the enemy base area. Additionally, he ordered the Airborne Division to be replaced by the Marine Division for the push to Tchepone.[630]

For once, LTG Lam chose to push back against President Thieu's plan. Replacing the Airborne Division in the middle of a fiercely contested fight with the untested headquarters of the Marine Division (led by his critic, LTG Khang) was an extremely difficult task. Instead, Lam requested – and was given presidential approval – to use his own more experienced 1st Division, reinforced by its 2d Regiment at the DMZ,

[629] Sorley, 249.
[630] Willbanks, 117-118.

to conduct a helicopter assault into Tchepone while the Marines replaced the 1st on the southern flank and the airborne-armor task force remained to hold the center.[631]

From 3-6 March, the 1st and 2d Regiments of the 1st Division were air assaulted into a string of landing zones and firebases running along the southern escarpment overlooking Route 9 all the way to Tchepone.[632] The U.S. airlift of this force was the largest and most protracted U.S airlift of the war, involving U.S. helicopters working their way through intense air defense fire, and aided supported by a doubling of tactical air and B-52 sorties from 194 per day to 211 for the remainder of the operation. At each landing site the 1st Division units moved out rapidly and destroyed or drove off the local opposition – usually company sized or less.[633] The 1st Regiment command post observed enemy tanks and destroyed three by calling in artillery fire.[634] This sudden rapid movement and the heavy casualties that they had incurred to date surprised the PAVN, which took 10 days to mount a response. In the interim, the 1st Division units destroyed an extensive number of massive caches containing 714 tons of ammunition, thousands of tons of rice, and vast stores of small arms, machine guns, mortars and artillery.[635]

While the 1st Division advanced to Tchepone, the 147th and 258th Brigades air assaulted into firebases to cover the southern flank of Route 9 up to Ban Dong while the Airborne Division and its supporting armor moved to occupy a series of firebases back along Route 9, while maintaining its forward positions in Ban Dong.[636] With the PAVN

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[631] Willbanks, 118-119
[632] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL II, III-2.
[633] Willbanks, 120-126.
[634] Loye Jr. et al., 66.
[635] Willbanks, 126
[636] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 93.

reorienting to meet the new threat to their rear, the Airborne forces encountered only light opposition, but the newly arrived Marine battalions moved aggressively to establish their new firebases on the southern side of Route 9, engaging and destroying several company and platoon sized PAVN formations with only light losses.[637]

On 1 March, GEN Abrams was able to convince President Thieu and GEN Vien that a joint US-RVNAF headquarters was vital to the ability of the U.S. to support RVNAF operations.[638] Shortly afterwards, LTG Sutherland established the XXIV Corps Joint Coordinating Group to assist in the planning and coordination of U.S. assets supporting Lam Son 719. To facilitate this group, a tactical coordination center was established right next to the I Corps advanced headquarters at Khe Sanh, providing an extensive communications network linking with XXIV Corps units and headquarters. The XXIV Corps artillery officer became LTG Sutherland's representative to LTG Lam. The 10st Assistant Division Commander for Operations (BG Berry) – who had already been coordinating airmobile operations – became Army Aviation Officer for the Joint Coordination Group as well as the de facto Corps aviation officer for LTG Lam, giving BG Berry greater credibility with the RVNAF commanders. The JCG staff either worked out of this headquarters or travelled with LTG Lam. They received his planning guidance and his priorities for airmobile support twice a day and then executed upon these – significantly improving coordination and overall U.S. support to the RVNAF.[639]

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[637] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 96.
[638] Cosmas, 332.
[639] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL I, I-25 - I-26.

Withdrawal

Although U.S. leaders were overjoyed with this dramatic change of events, President Thieu, GEN Vien, and LTG Lam were all satisfied by the end of the 1st week of March that the operation's goals had been met.[640] Additionally, Thieu was desperate to extricate his strategic reserve before a renewed PAVN onslaught could cause further losses. Kissenger urged Ambassador Bunker to impress upon Thieu that "every week ARVN stays in Laos represents a serious blow to the enemy's offensive capability, not only for this dry season, but more importantly, for the rest."[641] Kissenger and the president wanted the RVNAF to still be in Laos for the upcoming announcement of the next U.S. troop withdrawals on 7 April. However, Thieu remained unmoved – the operation was terminated and the three battalions 2d Regiment led off a phased withdrawal by climbing the ridge south of Tchepone on 10 March.[642]

The RVNAF withdrawal – leapfrogging units back along the route to South Vietnam – began with gradually increasing contact from 10-14 March and then intensified into an increasingly desperate fight as reinforcing PAVN units sought to defeat the withdrawing South Vietnamese. The plan was for first the 1st Division, then the Airborne Division and finally the Marine Division to withdraw. The thirty M41 tanks and 9 M113 APCs, of 4th ARVN Armored Battalion crossed the border to aid with route security along Route 9.[643] The 2d ARVN Regiment was airlifted from Tchepone back along Route 9 to the center of the 1st Division area and began patrolling in its new area

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[640] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 99-100.
[641] Willbank, 130.
[642] Willbank, 130-131; Loye Jr. et al., 66.
[643] Loye Jr. et al., 68.

with only light contact.[644] On 15 March, the PAVN began heavy attacks seeking to pin down and surround the firebases of the 1st Regiment, now the westernmost RVNAF element, as well as the 3d Regiment to its southeast and the Airborne-armor task force at Ban Dong. Under heavy PAVN rocket and artillery fire as well as close assault from PAVN infantry, the 1st Regiment executed a fighting withdrawal to the east. Although the majority of the Regiment evaded encirclement, the 4th Battalion was trapped and, despite air support from tactical air and helicopter gunships, the battalion was overrun and only 32 survivors were evacuated by air.[645]

By the 18 March, the 3d ARVN Regiment and then the 1st Regiment had been withdrawn to South Vietnam by air. On several occasions the battalions had to fight their way to new extraction zones and airlifted out in contact with the PAVN while supported by air and artillery. [646] On the 19th, the armor-airborne task force withdrew from Ban Dong overland along Route 9 and linked up with the 2d Airborne Battalion at Firebase Alpha ten kilometers to the rear.[647] By now the Marine brigades were heavily engaged as well and on 19 March the 147th Brigade at Fire Support Base Delta to the southeast was tightly encircled by PAVN preventing resupply or reinforcement and its ten supporting 105mm howitzers were knocked out one by one by PAVN artillery fire.[648]

The final withdrawal into South Vietnam was conducted under extreme pressure from multiple PAVN divisions. Holding Route 9 open from Firebase Alpha to Firebase

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[644] Loye Jr. et al., 68-69.
[645] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 106-108.
[646] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL II, III-4.
[647] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 111.
[648] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 113-116.

Bravo on 20 March, the 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron and 8th Airborne Division repulsed PAVN attempts to break through with heavy losses, allowing the extraction of Airborne artillery from Firebase Alpha.[649]

On 21 March, 788 gunship sorties, eleven B-52 missions and 157 tactical air sorties caused extensive damage to the PAVN seeking to prevent ongoing helicopter extractions, the retro-grading armor-airborne task force, and the PAVN siege of the Marines in Firebase Delta. American helicopters successfully extracted the 2d ARVN Regiment and 1st Airborne Brigade, after these units broke at night with their PAVN attackers and moved to new extraction zones.[650] After seven hours of combat from late afternoon with two attacking PAVN battalions as it moved east towards Firebase Delta, the 1st Armored Brigade commander was never informed that another airborne battalion had successfully cleared yet another ambush at a crossing of the Xepon River. Instead, COL Luat led his hundred-plus vehicle convoy on a meandering 17 kilometer route during which they abandoned half their force – 21 tanks, 26 APCs, 13 bulldozers and 50 other vehicles at a night bivouac area and did not cross the border until 23 March.[651]

From 22-24 March, the final RVNAF units conducted a fighting withdrawal to South Vietnam under heavy pressure. Late in the afternoon of 22 March, the PAVN launched a new assault on the 147th Marine Brigade in Firebase Delta led by ten flamethrowing tanks. Although the marines destroyed two tanks with LAWs, a second hit a mine and a 4th was destroyed by an airstrike, the PAVN infantry-armor assault

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[649] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 115.
[650] 101st Airborne, Lamson 719 VOL II, III-4.
[651] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 117-119; Willbanks, 148-149.

continued and the 147th's commander chose to break out of the firebase. Fighting throughout the night, the battalions of the brigade cut through the PAVN lines and reached the 258th Marine Brigade at Firebase Hotel to the east the next morning. On 23 March, the 147th was airlifted back to South Vietnam, with the 258th at Firebase Hotel Brigades were airlifted back to South Vietnam, having caused an estimated 2000 casualties to the 29th and 803d PAVN regiments. The 258th and its ten artillery pieces followed the next day along with the last of the Airborne brigades.[652] Although the 1st Division's Black Panther reconnaissance teams would continue to launch cross border raids in the following weeks, this constituted the end of major combat operations for the RVNAF in Laos.

Analysis

Although the month-long Lam Son 719 brought a high cost in casualties – particularly to the Airborne and 1st Divisions – and vehicles and the pictures of battered I Corps troops withdrawing across the Laotian border badly damaged South Vietnamese public opinion, there were significant positive signs for the RVNAF as well. Without the inexplicable halt at Ban Dong early in the operation, the results of Lam Son 719 might have been far different. When they moved, the RFVNAF had proved more agile than their North Vietnamese adversaries, who took several days to react to their enemy each time the main effort of the operation changed to a new location. These air movements themselves came through U.S. capabilities, but upon reaching their objectives, most RVNAF units at the brigade level and below generally executed their tasks aggressively

[652] Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 119-120.

and effectively. The operation showed that South Vietnamese tactical units could operate without their advisors and still effectively utilize joint fires. The key problems in the operation were with command and control at the Corps level, although ARVN armor continued to lag behind their infantry peers in aggressiveness and airborne-armor coordination had been spotty as well.

Most importantly, the RVNAF had demonstrated that they could operate effectively without advisors at the regimental level and below. True, this involved dependence on American capabilities such as air transport and airstrikes, but RVNAF infantry units of all types (ARVN, Airborne, and Marine) had proven their proficiency in executing their end of airmobile operations. They moved aggressively after landing at their objectives, conducting necessary patrols, establishing strong defenses, and destroying extensive enemy supply caches. They held defensive positions against APAVN attacks supported by heavy artillery and effectively called in fire support which badly damaged their attackers.

After enduring multi-day sieges and subsequently being overrun by enemy ground forces, the Rangers and Marines had successfully exfiltrated their units through their attackers and moved through difficult terrain to link up with neighboring formations while maintaining unit integrity. These are *extremely* difficult operations for *any* military to successfully conduct. The 1st Division had similarly withdrawn their units under a massive combined arms assault, although this had resulted in the loss of the battalion serving as a rear guard. Overall, we can evaluate all of these brigade level units as well as

the 1st Division headquarters – which benefitted from prior experience and strong leadership – at an effectiveness level of "Combined/Joint Offective". [653]

One positive development in Lam Son 719 was the use of ranger groups as operational commands to command and control multiple ranger battalions. Although the ranger groups that had been first created by the JGS in 1966, they had been sidelined for a number of years by the corps commanders, with their subordinate battalions used individually to support operations in a piecemeal fashion. Although originally envisioned only as administrative and logistics structures (for which they had largely been underutilized), they now proved equally effective in combat and allowed multiple ranger battalions to be used together to great effect. Although relatively untested in terms of commanding and controlling forces in such a large operation, both Ranger group commanders and staffs stepped up to the task and performed well. Following Lam Son 719, the use of Ranger groups as operational commands became common practice.

Operating in combined arms operation both with and against armored formations was more of a mixed bag for the RVNAF, demonstrating training deficiencies for ARVN infantry as well as coordination issues between the subordinate elements of the Airborne Division and 1st Armored Brigade. None of the RVNAF infantry had been trained in counter-armor tactics and different units responded with varying levels of effectiveness. The airborne forces protecting the northern flank did not use their own intrinsic light antitank weaponry. The Rangers, Marines and the 1st Division were more capable against

[653] The Marine Division headquarters was not evaluated by this study. Its two subordinate brigades performed effectively, but there is no information – positive or negative – to show any particular coordination role for the Marine division in the latter phases of the operation when they and their forces were involved.

enemy armor with LAWs and were also able to use their own artillery to a limited degree to destroy tanks (not a normal task for artillery) as well as to call in supporting air against these tanks more effectively than their Airborne counterparts.

The slow initial movement of the airborne-armor task force can be attributed to poor weather and the poor condition of the road and they appeared ready for more rapid movement to Tchepone when they were halted by LTG Lam. However, elements of the armored task force – which should have been the most mobile ground unit available – seemed hesitant at best (or they deliberately ignored the directive) when ordered by LTG Dong to come to the aid of his beleaguered Airborne being attacked by PAVN armor at Firebase Alpha. Perhaps this is due to the fact that these armored forces used to working under airborne command or that the Airborne Division had not effectively integrated 1st Armor into their operations. Given this fact, the Airborne Division's headquarters is assigned a rating of "Basic Proficiency" rather than "Combined/Joint Operations" due to their overall difficulties with integrating the 1st Armored Brigade into their operations as a central component of the joint task force.

When supported by U.S. air elements that were the primary tank killers and frantically hunting the PAVN armor rushing to engage the RVNAF, the ARVN tanks in the airborne-armor team did contribute effectively to the series of battles which blunted the PAVN's armored attacks against the withdrawing forces. Abandoning almost a battalion's worth of armored vehicles during the final phases of the withdrawal also doesn't reflect well on these units. Overall, as in operations in Cambodia, ARVN armored forces continued to be far less aggressive than their infantry peers. This makes

sense when one considers the other RVNAF units participating in this operation. The Airborne, Marines, and 1st Division had all performed years of partnered operations with their American peers. RVNAF armor had not previously been called on to the degree that it was used in the latter years of the war when the South Vietnamese transitioned to their own offensive operations. This contributes to the evaluation of the 1st Armored Brigade on the lower edge of "Basic Proficiency."

Although U.S. FACs and U.S. liaison elements at ARVN divisions were the ones actually coordinating the fires, the individual ARVN ground units interfaced with them effectively through the South Vietnamese translators in the observation planes and the U.S. liaisons at their headquarters. They were able to utilize their own artillery, including to destroy PAVN armor on several occasions, but the key element producing such extensive casualties for the Norther Vietnamese was the massive American supporting air effort, ranging from helicopter gunships all the way up to B-52s. Integrating with these capabilities effectively is not a strike against the ARVN – they performed it successfully. If the interface had not worked effectively on the South Vietnamese side of the equation then casualties would have been far higher and the U.S. supporting air arm would not have been able to bring effective fires against the PAVN, which rushed to gain and maintain close contact with RVNAF units as closely as possible to avoid casualties.

In many ways, the operation was a good example of partnering. The RVNAF ground forces and supporting artillery were paired with a wealth of American air resources to enable an operation they would otherwise be unable to perform and they simultaneously gained critical experience and the chance to improve client state (ie South

Vietnamese) command and control systems and processes. Operating without their attached U.S. advisors was a critical test to see if they replicate one of the most important roles that these advisors had formerly played – as the coordinator of U.S. airpower – and RVNAF units showed they could handle this effectively.

There were limits to these benefits, however, particularly for the VNAF– a critical component for any future independent South Vietnamese operations. American and South Vietnamese leaders knew that the heavy antiaircraft defenses in southern Laos would create a challenging operational environment for aircraft. Since the VNAF were largely untrained for nor had operated in this sort of non-permissible environments before, the mission was given solely to U.S. aircraft. Except for a small number of VNAF helicopters used in Lam Son 719, the rest of the VNAF would instead support continuing operations in Cambodia with its the less hostile air defense environment.[654]

Although this may seem a logical call, the operation missed the chance to develop these capabilities through experience – another example of the pitfalls of capability substitution. The RFNAV in this operation were reliant on largely U.S. assets and protocols for air support and air transport. Although many U.S. leaders planned and hoped for a complete end to the conflict prior to U.S. withdrawal, a more pragmatic observer would clearly realize that these were capabilities which the South Vietnamese would need in the future. Not having the chance to gain operational experience or to develop and utilize their own air coordination systems and assets created a long term problem for future independent joint RVNAF effectiveness. South Vietnamese fighter

[654] Willbanks, 42.

bombers did rise to the occasion a year later by providing effective close air support in the Easter Offensive (detailed below). In contrast, however, VNAF FACs refused to fly forward to cover their supported ground forces in this subsequent operation's intense air defense environment, limiting RVNAF ability to direct and control artillery, naval gunfire, and airstrikes.

Both the U.S. and the RVNAF missed an opportunity by failing to establish a joint headquarters until three weeks into the operation. Simply having liaisons at South Vietnamese headquarters was not enough to provide rapid and responsive support – particularly in planning – for such a complex operation. The subsequent integrated I Corps headquarters is credited with achieving much more timely response for air transport and fire support and this should have been obvious to U.S. planners from the start. This should have been a required first step for the U.S. to push and establish before the beginning of any operations.

The critical weakness that was exposed by Lam Son 719 was the unpreparedness of I Corps commander LTG Lam and his headquarters to command and control multi-division operations. Above the brigade/regimental[655] level, many of the RVNAF higher headquarters structures were not prepared to conduct offensive operations and had not made the same advances as some of their tactical subordinate units. While some units such as the Airborne Division appeared to improve their ability to command and control

[655] Brigade and regiments are the same size formations. They both control multiple battalions. The difference is simply a stylistic difference based on the particular component (ARVN regiments were the equivalent to Airborne and Marine brigades…or the new Ranger Groups.)

their forces during the operation, those with ineffective leaders such as the 1st Corps headquarters lagged much further behind.

The weakness in many RVNAF division and corps headquarters now being exposed by Vietnamization was a byproduct of years of largely unilateral American operations. The smaller scale operations conducted by the RVNAF in the much less mobile Pacification mission required limited higher level supervision and many RVNAF commanders and their headquarters had focused largely on political and administrative task. The critical staff processes and experience necessary to control these forces either atrophied or never developed in the first place. Additionally, since the division and corps were not given the opportunity to fail it did not expose the weaknesses of commanders such as LTG Lam to the degree that offensive combat operations would bring and which would have provided easier opportunities for U.S. leaders to convince or pressure the South Vietnamese political leadership to make critical and necessary leadership changes.

This also demonstrates a challenge of partnering – its ability to produce improvements in the client force is limited by the scope of partnering efforts. The majority of RVNAF combat operations that had occurred in the preceding years had been conducted by units at the brigade level and below, and generally with only certain more elite units conducting such operations on a regularly recurring basis. By this point in the war, the entire 1st Division as well as the Ranger Groups, Marine and Airborne brigades and their subordinate battalions were used to controlling their own forces in offensive operations alongside American forces. From this experience they had progressed much

further than the rest of the RVNAF and this was shown through their much more effective performance in Lam Son 719.

In Cambodia, LTG's Tri and Thanh – both strong corps commanders – had gone around weak division commanders by establishing brigade-sized combined arms task forces that they (Tri and Thanh) controlled directly. As has been discussed previously, from a sheer span of control standpoint, such micromanagement was possible in Toan Thang 42 because they were essentially controlling only a division or less worth of units at a time. In the case of Lam Son 719, however, the I Corps actually had to command and control large numbers of units that were simultaneously in action as well as manage an immense number of supporting aircraft in coordination with the U.S. The operation thus exposed both Lam's timid approach to an operation requiring aggression and momentum, his inability to manage strong-willed subordinate division commanders, and the inability of his staff to coordinate the complex tasks that were required of them. The I Corps staff can thus be rated as "Lacking Basic Proficiency" – as we have seen this had devastating effects for the operation.

Lam's subordinates repeatedly contested his orders during the operation and although he appealed to President Thieu for support, Thieu was unable or unwilling to risk offending his two strategic reserve commanders, one of whom (Airborne Division commander LTG Dong) commanded his primary countercoup force.[656] Although we don't know what orders the inexperienced Lam, who was further away from the

[656] James H. Willibanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014) 165.

battlefield, was giving to these two subordinates, this lack of unity of command is dysfunctional and may have played a role in Lam's hesitancy to push his forces forward.

Overall, although the cost of Lam Son 719 was high, it showed that the RVNAF were continuing to evolve. They had been given an extremely challenging mission on terrain that would have been difficult for an equivalent American formation as well. The great limiting factor was the weakness in some key RVNAF leaders such as LTG Lam and within some of their higher headquarters staffs. Over time this could have been overcome with experience, but time was a shrinking commodity.

Exemplar Battle 3: I Corps in Quang Tri province during the Easter Offensive (1972)

US Security Forces Committed: **Yes**
Primacy of US Combat Force Mission to: **Partnering**
Advisors down to what level: **ARVN Regiment; Marine and Airborne battalion**

The 1972 "Easter Offensive" constituted a dramatic change in the Vietnam War. After suffering extensive losses retaking terrain during Lam Son 719 and with the PLAF no longer a significant factor following the Tet offensive and subsequent gains in pacification, North Vietnam's leadership decided on a major change in operations. On March 30, 1972, they launched a massive, three-pronged conventional invasion designed to seize critical provinces in the north, center, and south of South Vietnam, shatter the RVNAF, and sever U.S. support for South Vietnam by delivering a major defeat during a

U.S. election year.[657] *The resulting battles involved most of their conventional forces - a total of ten PAVN divisions, almost all of their North's armored forces and large numbers of new Russian-supplied heavy artillery against an equal sized ARVN force. Building on lessons learned from Lam Son 719, the North Vietnamese attack was characterized by massive artillery bombardments supporting combined armor and infantry assaults.*[658] *With American ground forces withdrawn by this later stage of the war, RVNAF forces faced the PAVN alone on the ground, although they benefited from extensive U.S. air and naval support coordinated by a committed, although significantly reduced advisory presence.*

Although major attacks were also launched in the center and south of the country, the primary objective for what North Vietnam labeled the "Nguyen Hue Offensive" were the two northernmost provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien.[659] *These were areas that had long borne heavy PAVN pressure as well as one of the main objectives (in Hue, capital of Thua Thien) of the Tet Offensive of 1968 (the last major invasion, also timed for a U.S. election year).*[660] *Caught off guard and under heavy pressure, the newly formed 3rd ARVN Division responsible for guarding Quang Tri province was badly*

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[657] Clarke, 481; Ngo Quang Truong, 1984, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, Indochina Monographs Series, Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1.
[658] Clarke, 481.
[659] Andrade, 29. The North Vietnamese named the offensive for a famous 18th Century Vietnamese ruler who defeated the Chinese occupation forces and united the country after more than a thousand years of foreign rule. For our purposes, we will use the more common "Easter Offensive" based on the timing of the attack.
[660] Andrade, 45.

battered and suffered the surrender of one of its regiments. After a month of fighting and despite reinforcement, the city of Quang Tri fell on May 1st.[661]

The loss of a provincial capital to North Vietnamese forces spurred intervention by U.S. leaders. Following intervention by GEN Abrams and Ambassador Bunker, President Thieu finally removed LTG Lam (and the commander of II Corps to the south as well) and moved LTG Truong up from IV Corps to replace him. The new commander quickly restored order, pieced broken units back together and organized a defense that stopped the PAVN advance at the southern border of Quang Tri province.[662] *Beginning in June, with three ARVN divisions against six PAVN divisions, Truong began a combined arms counteroffensive lasting the rest of the summer culminating in the recapture of Quang Tri City by late September.*[663]

The Situation

By March 1972, the U.S. strategy of Vietnamization was entering its final phase of self-sufficiency for South Vietnam. Despite increasing signs of an approaching offensive, the Nixon administration was in the midst of a re-election campaign centering on withdrawal from Vietnam. MACV's troop strength at the beginning of the war year was 139,000 and by the end of the year would be down to 24,000. The troop drawdown would continue unabated even during the height of coming Easter Offensive.[664]

The two northern provinces of South Vietnam – which had at one time been defended by 80,000 American troops – were now only defended by two ARVN divisions

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[661] Andrade, 156-157.
[662] Cosmos, 363; Sorley, 337.
[663] Sorley, 227.
[664] Andrade, 23; Cosmos, 346.

and supporting armor, artillery, and marine forces totaling less than 25,000.[665] To the north, the new 3d ARVN Division, formed only six months before, occupied a series of firebases along the traditionally contested DMZ. Just to the south in Thua Thien province, the veteran 1st ARVN Division, with two of its original regiments and one new regiment, occupied positions to defend the western approaches to Hue.[666]

The 3d Division had been formed from elements of the pre-existing 1st and 2d Divisions. Its veteran 2d Regiment had been transferred from the 1st Division largely intact. However, the 56th and 57th Regiments were new organizations with battalions formed with a combination of soldiers transferred from the across the 2d Division, new recruits, federalized Regional Force troops (many reportedly not happy with their new full time status), and seven hundred former ARVN deserters. The new battalions had been pushed through unit training at the ARVN training center at Phu Bai, while the older units assumed positions along the DMZ.

The problem with the 3d Division was that it was not yet a fully formed and cohesive unit. Its different elements hadn't learned how to work together or implement all of the various processes required of a large combat organization. Nevertheless, it was tasked with one of the most difficult tasks in the entire ARVN – holding the DMZ and the northwestern approaches from Laos. The planning and execution of the 2d Regiment's first multi-battalion exercise as a reflagged 3d Division unit was deemed "exceptional" by U.S. 3d Division advisors.[667] On the other hand, the other two

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[665] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 612.
[666] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 613.
[667] Wiest, 238-240.

regiments were "assortments[s] of individual battalions that were at different states of readiness, ability and training."[668] 3d Division Commander BG Giai aware of the shortfalls and working furiously to fix them through intensive training and personal presence.[669] However, he wouldn't have time to fix his myriad problems before the unforeseen invasion arrived.

The 56th, 57th and 2d Regiments occupied a series of outposts along the DMZ from the Gulf of Tonkin west to the mountains as well as the major fire base at Camp Carroll to the southwest of the main line of defenses[670] Under BG Giai's operational control, but not organic to the division, the 147th and the 258th Marine Brigades occupied outposts running along the mountain ridges comprising the western border of the province and faced towards Laos, believed to be the probable direction for enemy attacks.[671] The 3d Division also had operational control of the 20th Tank Squadron which was in reserve. The 20th had just come out of an extensive training program where it had been the first (and only to date) unit in South Vietnam to receive the more capable M-48 main battle tank to replace the M41 light tanks fielded by the rest of the ARVN armored force.[672] To the east of the highway, Regional Force elements occupied a line of outposts running along the DMZ to the coastline. Although under BG Giai's supervision, he did not directly control the RF, which were command by the district chiefs and province chief.[673] Further south, was the remainder of the 1st Armored Brigade of which the 20th

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[668] Wiest, 240.
[669] Wiest, 241.
[670] Gerald H. Turley, 1985, *The Easter Offensive: Vietnam, 1972*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 47-48.
[671] Turley, 48.
[672] Turley, 51.
[673] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 613-614; Turley, 48.

Tank Squadron was a part. The 1st Armored was under direct I Corps control. It had suffered heavy losses in Lam Son 71, its last combat action a year before, and had spent the last year reorganizing and refitting.[674]

To the north of I Corps, North Vietnamese leaders were preparing to unleash the largest offensive of the war – a conventional combined arms assault that was a dramatic departure from previous operations. Despite suffering significant losses in Lam Son 719 and having to rely on overwhelming numbers to achieve success, influential leaders in the North Vietnamese politburo saw their rout of RVNAF forces, even when backed by U.S. airpower, as a sign that the time was ripe to move to bring the war to a close through a conventional victory. They had convinced their peers that the closing stages of Vietnamization offered a window to strike. Additionally, North Vietnam found itself the subject of a Soviet and Chinese competition for influence that resulted in dramatically increased military and economic aid in late 1971. This included large numbers of T-54 tanks and state of the art 130mm heavy artillery and heat-seeking SA-7 shoulder fired missiles.[675]

The Plan – or lack of one

There were a number of clear indications that a major offensive was coming and GEN Abrams had warned Washington and Pacific Command in Hawaii in January that an attack was eminent, but little was done to deal with it. Beginning in December 1971, U.S. intelligence officials observed the increasing movement of North Vietnamese on the

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[674] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 614.
[675] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 611; Andrade, 40.

Ho Chi Minh Trail and armor concentrations of armor along the border larger and further south than ever before. Human intelligence sources provided a policy document from the North Vietnamese politburo indicating that a dramatic shift had occurred in December 1971 from the previous policy of protracted war to a new strategy of "main force warfare and political initiative."[676] Although intelligence officials believed that the attack would seek to inflict heavy losses on the ARVN to critically weaken the South Vietnamese government, this was thought to be "somewhat unrealistic" by GEN Abrams.[677] Regardless, both intelligence officials and MACV leaders believed that massed attacks would be vulnerable to air strikes and artillery bombardment.[678]

Despite the warnings of an impending offensive, the 1st Corps and 3d Division staffs – as well as their American advisors – did not anticipate a major attack across the DMZ.[679] LTG Lam assessed that it was likely another, more subdued Tet offensive was coming, with shelling and sapper attacks on his rear areas or possibly an attack from Laos into western Quang Tri, western Thua Theien or somewhere further south.[680]

Neither LTG Lam or BG Giai felt that an attack would come across the DMZ. They discounted the fact that the PAVN had moved armor, surface to air missiles and heavy artillery just north of the DMZ. While minor incursions and shelling had occurred

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[676] Andrade, 25; Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, Vietnam Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 157.
[677] Andrade, 27.
[678] Andrade, 30,
[679] Turley, 62.
[680] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 615.

across the DMZ in the past, all previous major attacks had come from the west out of Laos and the DMZ itself had remained largely sacrosanct.[681]

A more pressing concern for BG Giai was to familiarize his men with the terrain in their new sector of being too attached to one location and not able to conduct mobile operations. Giai was concerned that the large firebases he had inherited from the Americans concentrated his men, made attractive artillery targets and only added to ARVN's traditional immobility. Focused on avoiding the "firebase syndrome," he accordingly planned for a rotation of two of his regiments to occur on March 30 with the 56th moving to Camp Carroll and the bases to its front on the western end of the line and the the 2d moving to the center to occupy the 56th's former positions. The 57th would remain in the bases along the coast.[682] Only adding to the problem, Giai and his advisor planned chose to depart the front lines for an extended Easter holiday weekend in Saigon.[683]

Command and Control

BG Vu Van Giai, the new commander of the 3rd Division, had previously performed well as assistant division commander of the 1st Division during Lam Son 719 and was a proven leader. Similarly, MG Phu remained as 1st Division commander. I Corps leadership, however was headed by ineffective, political appointees. LTG Lam

[681] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 388; Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975*, New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018), 606.
[682] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 616.
[683] Andrade, 51.

remained the commander and his new deputy corps commander, MG Hieu had just been removed for incompetence from command of the 5th Division near Saigon.[684]

In the initial two days of the attack, some ARVN commanders were hesitant to report the extreme nature of their situation, making it difficult for higher level commanders and staffs to understand the depth of the problem facing I Corps. Companies and battalions within the 56th regiment withheld information to safe face, even as they were being overrun.[685] Similarly, LTG Lam did not clarify his situation to the JGS – "Lam would not report bad news" according to JGS Chief GEN Vien – and Saigon was unaware of the enormity of the attack and the dire straits of their forces in Quang Tri.[686] In previous times the advisory chain could have provided a separate reporting chain to clarify what was going on, but with advisors pulled from battalion level and from the 2d Regiment this was no longer the case.

Advisory Relationship

The U.S. drawdown was moving into its latter phases. Not only had U.S. ground forces departed, but the advisory ranks were also heavily depleted and continuing to go down. Whereas advisors had previously served at all levels of the RVNAF down to the battalion level and sometimes even the company level in the field, by March of 1972 their ranks had thinned dramatically. While specialized forces such as Rangers, Airborne, Marines, still retained advisors at the battalion level – for the time being – this was not

[684] Clarke, 486.
[685] Turley, 87.
[686] Hastings, 607.

the case for the regular ARVN formations. The standard regimental advisory team was now only two men and many ARVN regiments were left completely uncovered.[687]

Despite the fact that the 3d ARVN Division was brand new, their own coverage was no different. U.S. Army Advisory Team 155 was assigned to the 3d Division, with small advisory elements at the division headquarters and with its two newer regiments, the 56th and 57th. The more experienced 2d ARVN Regiment and all of the ARVN infantry battalions no longer had attached U.S. advisory personnel. The 20th Tank Battalion, which was just completing a transition to new M48A3 tanks, was still supported with an advisory team.[688]

Conduct of the Operation

The North Vietnamese Attack

At noon on a rainy Thursday, March 30, 1972, three PAVN divisions supported by 2 tank regiments and five regiments of artillery support attacked south across the DMZ in their largest offensive of the war. Massed concentrations of 130mm artillery, 122mm rocket, and mortar fire pounded every major RVNAF installation along the border.[689]

The attack caught the 56th Regiment still in the midst of its move to the west. The movement was disorganized – both regiments shut down their command posts and loaded their radios at 11:30 am and there was no contact between the regiments or with division

[687] Wiest, 240.
[688] Turley, 46-47.
[689] Turley, 53, 57; Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 25.

headquarters. A shortage of trucks and rainy conditions further slowed the move.[690] The 2d Regiment had only just arrived at its new outposts when the attack began and both units remained out of radio contact for a half hour after the attack.[691]

The PAVN attack was designed to exploit the longer range of the Soviet 130mm artillery over the shorter ranged RVNAF 105 and 155mm cannons. With excellent intelligence of the area, the PAVN artillery was placed outside the range of the South Vietnamese guns. The only guns that could fire effectively were the four 175mm guns at Camp Carroll and the four at Dong Ha. However, the South Vietnamese gunners weren't used to operating under artillery fire and sought cover rather than continuing to engage while under fire. The overall fire from the ARVN and VNMC gunners was sporadic and generally ineffective.[692] The attack occurred during Quang Tri's monsoon season and low cloud cover badly hampered an air response, particularly in the first few days of the offensive.[693]

Similarly, the 3d Division staff and its advisors were caught off guard and at first were paralyzed by the intensity of the attack and the high volume of accurate artillery fire.[694]

By the end of the second day, the RVNAF were unable to maintain their positions against increasing and overwhelming pressure and withdrew under contact from all strongpoints along the northern perimeter of Quang Tri province. The ARVN, Marine,

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[690] Andrade, 51.
[691] Andrade, 52; Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 25.
[692] Turley, 69, 75.
[693] Hastings, 707.
[694] Turley, 62.

and RF forces faced intense ground attacks and punishing heavy artillery fire.[695] On the western side of defenses, the Marine battalion occupying outposts Hui Ba Ho and Sarge was overrun, with only remnants getting out.[696]

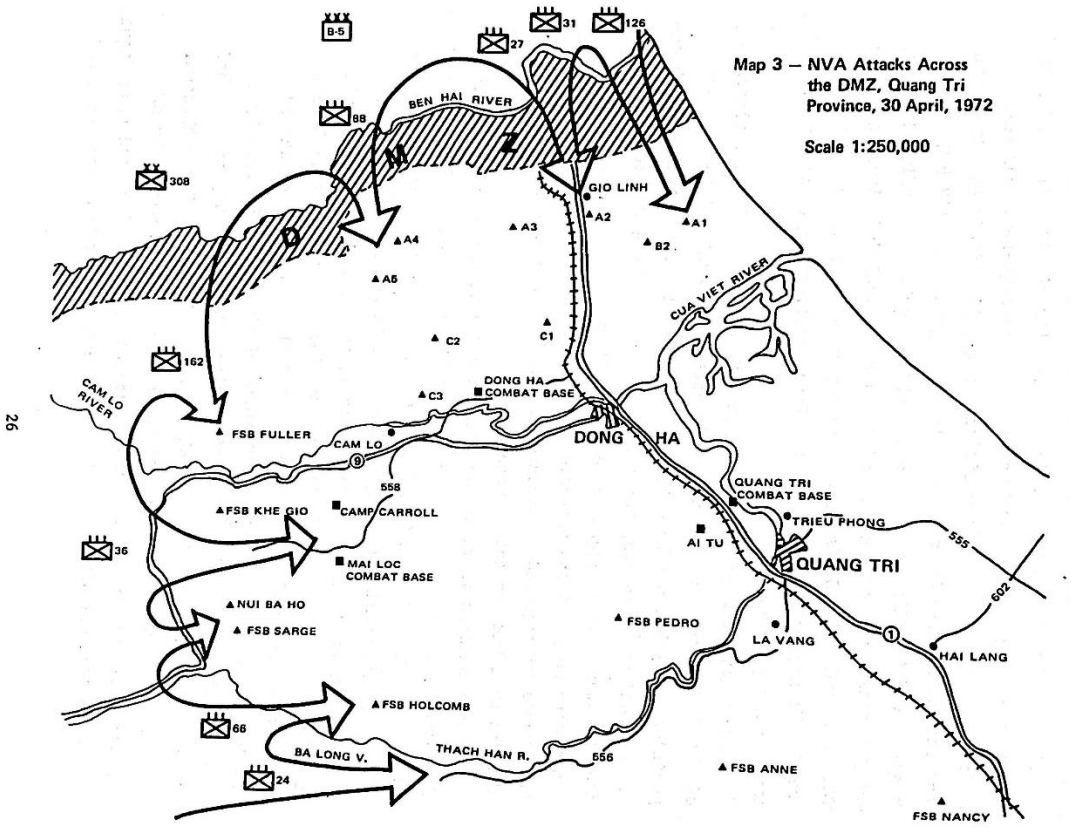

Figure 17: PAVN Cross-Border Attacks against Northern I Corps, Apr 1972[697]

[695] Truong, 24-25.
[696] Turley, 81-83.
[697] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 26.

Despite the heavy pressure from the PAVN attackers, the RVNAF executed a generally effective and orderly withdrawal under contact in accordance with established plans as the enemy continued to advance over the next two days. Maintaining cohesion while withdrawing under contact is a difficult task for any military, for the recently formed units of the 3d Division and the RF. The wet and foggy weather made movement even more difficult and precluded the majority of US and VNAF airpower. U.S. naval gunfire was the primary means of fire support. The large numbers of civilians on the roads fleeing the PAVN's deliberate targeting of populated areas was another challenge.[698] The 148th Marine Brigade and the 56th Brigade fell back to Mai Loc Combat Base and Camp Carroll, respectively. In the center and east, the 2d and 57th Regiments fell back to the Cam Lo and Cua Viet rivers. The exceptions to these otherwise challenging, but otherwise orderly movements were in the 57th Regiment, where transportation could not be found to withdraw two artillery batteries at outposts A2 and C1, forcing twelve badly needed howitzers (six 105mm and six 155mm) to be destroyed in place by retreating forces.[699]

With the PAVN continuing to advance on the evening of April 1st, the third day of the offensive, BG Giai displaced himself and the majority of his headquarters out of heavy artillery range, but also away from the advisory elements that remained in the division's tactical operations center and its vital communications network. For the rest of the night the division's leadership was out of contact with its subordinate forces that were

[698] Turley, 70-71.
[699] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 26-27.

in the midst of leapfrogging to the rear. For the next two days, the task of coordinating the division's supporting arms (armor, Marines, and Regional Forces) and integrating U.S. fire support was the responsibility of the VNMC's 258th brigade commander, COL Ngo Van Dinh, and US advisors. [700]

While placing a Vietnamese Marine in charge of this coordination for the ARVN 3d Division had the additional effect of ensuring that the Marines and ARVN forces would be well integrated, it was not ideal. While he did remain in the TOC, COL Dinh also had his own division to command and so de-facto coordination of support to the division became largely the responsibility of the U.S. advisors. By the end of the next day, the ARVN communications net was back up and running, but with BG Giai personally supervising actions on the ground he was often out of communications with the division and his own staff back at their new headquarters in the Quang Tri Citadel five miles further south still left much of the coordination to Dinh and the advisory staff.

The Bridge at Dong Ha and Surrender of the ARVN 56th Regiment

The fourth day, April 2, mixed success and great failure for the RVNAF. Two PAVN divisions and two tank regiments advanced on the Cam Lo-Cam Viet river seeking to cross the bridge and Dong Ha and then seize Quang Tri City.[701] At midday when an erroneous report of tanks crossing the Dong Ha bridge reached the 57th Regiment's command post, the regiment – which had been steadily pushed back for three

[700] Turley, 112-113.
[701] Turley, 132.

days – disintegrated. The regimental command staff and hundreds of soldiers streamed south along with the mass of refugees fleeing down Highway 1.[702]

Luckily, at the request of U.S. advisors (and after requesting and receiving permission directly from the Marine Division chain of command back in Saigon rather than from his 3d division or I Corps chain of command), COL Dinh had earlier sent his 3d Marine battalion along with the 20th Tank Battalion to stop the PAVN advance past the bridge.[703] Two of the battalion's tank companies were effective in engaging and destroying infiltrating PAVN forces on the outskirts of Dong Ha. However, it took extensive prodding from U.S. advisors to get the tank battalion commander to move one of his companies up to the bridge through the heavy artillery fire raining down on the town.[704]

[702] Turley, 153.
[703] Turley, 151.
[704] Turley, 156-158, 177-176, Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 29.

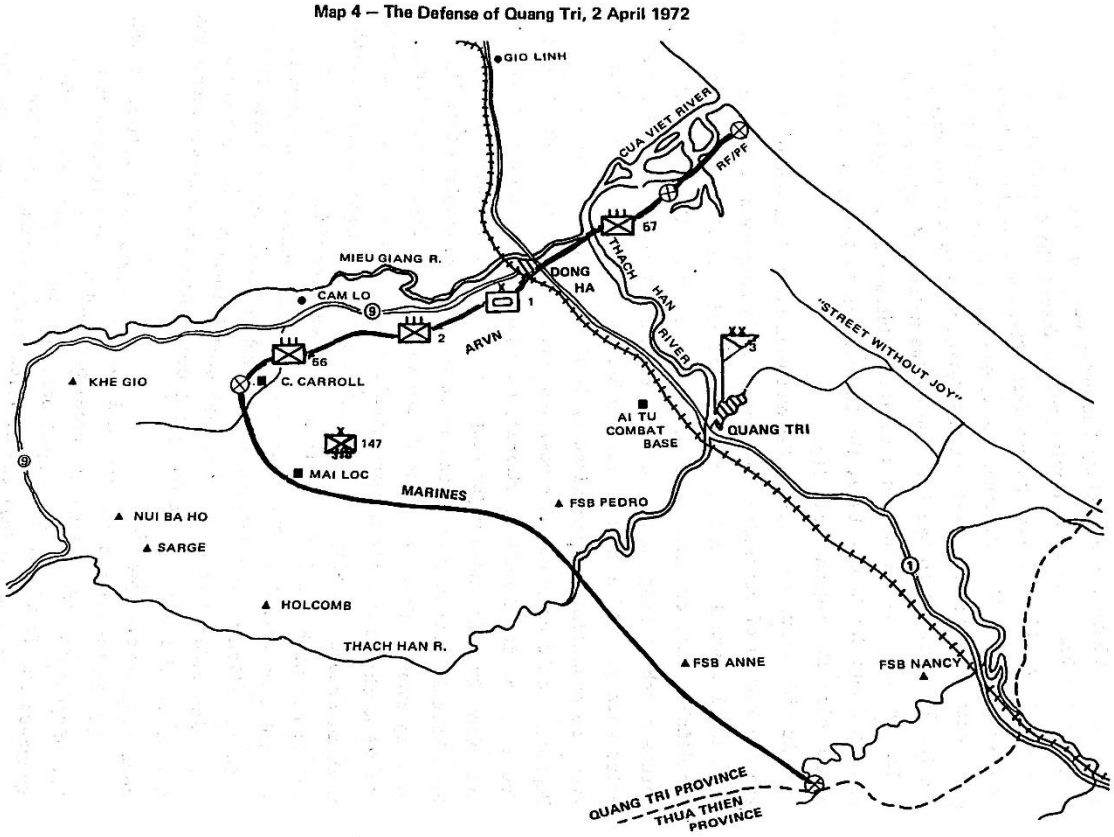

Figure 18: The RVNAF Defense of Defense of Quang Tri Province, Apr 2, 1972[705]

Upon reaching the bridge, the South Vietnamese M-48s and Marines with LAW anti-tank rockets, supported by U.S. naval gunfire and VNAF air strikes, stopped the PAVN advance for several hours. Air strikes from VNAF A1 Skyraiders destroyed eleven tanks. A company of M48s to the east of Dong Ha – benefiting from their recent gunnery training on their new tanks - engaged PAVN armor at extremely long range

[705] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 28.

(3000 yards) and destroyed another eleven PAVN tanks. [706] Finally, a marine squad guarding the south side of the bridge itself destroyed a PAVN T-54 with a LAW antitank rocket at close range. During this time, a U.S. Marine Corps advisor climbed under the bridge and completed the wiring for explosives laid earlier by ARVN engineers and then blew up the bridge, stopping the North Vietnamese advance.[707] Later in the day, BG Giai flew to Dong Ha and succeeded in rallying the 57th regiment south of Dong Ha.[708]

While the RVNAF and U.S. advisors were stopping the PAVN at the Dong Ha bridge, however, disaster was brewing to the west. After days of fighting where it had first been attacked during its move into its new positions, then lost its forward outposts and now found itself under repeated ground and heavy artillery assault at Camp Carroll, the 56th Regiment was wavering. With little to no artillery or air support and feeling himself cut off from his division and corps leadership, the 56th Regiment's commander, COL Pham Van Dinh chose to surrender his forces. [709]

The sudden and unforeseen loss of Camp Carroll, with its critical position, 1500 soldiers, and the largest assemblage of artillery in I Corps – twenty two howitzers including a battery of 175mm guns, unhinged the western flank of the defenses. At the request of the 147th Marine brigade commander at Mai Loc to the south of Camp Carroll, BG Giai authorized its evacuation and the marines fell back to Quang Tri the next afternoon. [710]

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[706] Andrade, 87-88.
[707] Andrade, 92-93.
[708] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 29.
[709] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 29-30.
[710] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 30.

The Defense of Firebase Pedro

The RVNAF defenders in Quang Tri began to solidify a new defensive line in the center and east of the province, which now finally began to stabilize. The new reduced defensive perimeter ran east-west along the Cua Viet river and the southern outskirts of Dong Ha and then south towards Firebase Pedro, which lay to the west of Quang Tri City.[711] After a period to refit following their initial attack, the PAVN attacked the VNMC 6th Battalion guarding Firebase Pedro on the morning of April 9th with a battalion of armor followed by a regiment of infantry and supported by heavy artillery.[712]

The attack on Firebase Pedro highlighted the PAVN's inability to coordinate armor and infantry forces against the improving RVNAF tactical capability. PAVN tanks led the assault unsupported by infantry and their visibility was reduced when accurate Marine 105mm artillery fire called in by the VNMC defenders forced them to close their hatches. The PAVN tanks took heavy casualties when they blundered into a South Vietnamese minefield. They were then stopped by marines with LAW rockets, some of whom let PAVN tanks roll over their foxholes before destroying them in their vulnerable rears with LAWs.[713]

The delay allowed the VNMC's 258th brigade commander, COL Dinh (who had earlier managed the 3d Division's supporting arms from their TOC) to organize a counterattacking force to come to the aid of his battalion on Firebase Pedro. Dinh organized eight M48 tanks and twelve armored personnel carriers from the 20th tank

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[711] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 33.
[712] Andrade, 115.
[713] Turley, 117; Andrade, 241.

battalion along with two battalions from his 1st Marine battalion to move quickly to engage the PAVN armor. The counterattacking force surprised the PAVN armor and – along with supporting VNMC artillery called in by the South Vietnamese and U.S. naval gunfire called in by advisors – destroyed a number of them. VNAF A-1 Skyraiders then destroyed the remainder of the retreating PAVN tanks.[714] The VNMC 6th Battalion Commander, Major Tung, then reassembled the counterattacking force and attacked the following PAVN infantry. Without their armor support, the PAVN infantry were forced to withdraw under the fire of the attacking VNAF air, artillery, infantry and armor.[715]

The battle of Firebase Pedro demonstrated a major evolution in RVNAF effectiveness. Twenty three PAVN tanks were destroyed or captured along with 420 enemy killed in action compared to only sixty-six Marines and ARVN. Although U.S. advisors were present, the defense and subsequent combined arms counterattack as well as the integration of RVNAF supporting air and artillery were planned and executed by South Vietnamese.

Operation Quang Trung 729 – Failed Counteroffensive

Although the surrender of a significant portion of the 57th Regiment at Camp Carroll was a severe blow that cost the RVNAF the western half of the province, it also provided a shock energizing the JGS to heavily reinforce I Corps. The 147th Marine Brigade was transported down to Hue City to rest and replenish and replaced by the 369th Marine Brigade, which had recently arrived in I Corps along with the Marine

[714] Turley, 117; Andrade, 238-239.
[715] Andrade, 240.

Commandant and his Marine division staff and the Ranger Command headquarters and three entire [regimental sized] Ranger groups.[716]

The rivalry that had formed between LTG Lam and his strategic reserve (Airborne, Marine, and Ranger) counterparts during Lam Son 719 remained strong and divisive, however – particularly with Marine Commandant LTG Khang who had failed to comply with Lam's orders during these earlier operations (as detailed previously). Rather than integrating these new staffs into his command and assigning them sectors of the defense and the command of their own forces, Lam left the Ranger Command and Marine division headquarters in Da Nang along with his own I Corps headquarters without assigning them any missions.[717]

Rather than assigning these new units to their own headquarters, Lam met BG Giai's urgent demands for reinforcement by slowly injecting these new Ranger units under the 3d Division command along with its two remaining regiments and two Marine brigades. BG Giai now found himself commanding a new division and which had been formed less than six months previously, an inexperienced staff which had recently been forced to displace under direct artillery fire, facing the recent surrender of one of his three regimental commanders, and now having to command and control nine regimental/brigade sized units – *a task normally handled by three divisions, not one inexperienced one.*[718] The command and control and logistical challenges for this large

[716] Turley, 228, Truong, 38.
[717] Truong, 32; Turley 228.
[718] Turley, 249. By the middle of April 1972, BG Giai was responsible for coordinating the actions of his two remaining ARVN regiments, two Marine brigades, four ranger groups, the 1st armor brigade and the Quang Tri Regional Forces and Corps level artillery and logistics units in the province. Additionally, he

and varied force were immense.[719] Adding to Giai's problems, he found that his new subordinate commanders did not take action on his orders until they had checked for approval from their own nearby headquarters. Additionally, his corps commander LTG Lam was frequently bypassing him to give [sometimes conflicting] orders directly to Giai's regimental and brigade commanders.[720]

By the middle of April, LTG Lam was eager to use his now reinforced forces to counterattack, but his battered troops and overwhelmed subordinate commander would prove unequal to the task. The PAVN had repositioned their heavy artillery in range of Quang Tri City and were clearly massing to the west of the city.[721] Accordingly, the RVNAF's Operation Quang Trung 729 was launched on April 14th with five separate task forces attacking west under the 3d Division's command while the remaining elements of the 57th Regiment maintained security along the northern flank (the south bank of the Cam Lo-Cua Viet River).[722] Lam had originally wanted to attack north across the river and advance all the way to the DMZ while ignoring the forces massing to his west, but had been talked out of this by GEN Abrams during a visit to Danang on 11 April.[723]

Although the plan was developed by Lam – still well to the rear in Da Nang having never ventured forward to observe his forward units – the execution was officially left to Giai (although Lam interfered multiple times by giving orders to different task

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was still nominally responsible for overseeing the status of the provincial and district governments in the province.

[719] Turley, 231.

[720] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 32; Vien, 303.

[721] Turley, 248.

[722] Turley, 248-249.

[723] Andrade, 100-101.

forces over the radio and unbeknownst to Giai).[724] BG Giai was unable to exert personal command over the disparate attacks on so many different avenues of advance. Not only were his limited command and control assets overstretched, he had moved his division headquarters to the Quang Tri Citadel where the US advisors and their vital communication gear was in a separate building from his own without even a telephone line for coordination.[725]

Rather than the combined arms task forces of the Cambodian incursion or Lam Son 719, the individual task forces were solely composed of infantry with the 1st Armored Brigade's two armored cavalry battalions. Although Lam had reported to Abrams that morale in his units was high, American advisors were far more concerned and LTG Frederick Kroesen, the U.S. commander of the First Regional Assistance Command had strongly advised Lam to lead his attacks with tanks to buoy his battered forces. LTG Lam disregarded this advice, however, and chose to hold his tanks in the rear and only commit them in response to PAVN armored attacks.[726]

Although the initial PAVN opposition to the offensive was very light, the weary RVNAF forces were hesitant to move from the defensive lines where they had been in contact for the last two weeks and the offensive never achieved its objectives.[727] By the 4th day, April 17th, none of the task forces had advanced more than a mile and the PAVN had now concentrated its units against the counterattack supported by heavy artillery fire

[724] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 38.
[725] Turley, 250
[726] Andrade, 101.
[727] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 37.

and armored attacks.[728] The battle settled into a costly battle of attrition for both sides as North Vietnamese heavy artillery steadily wore down RVNAF strength while U.S. and VNAF tactical air support – taking advantage of the clear weather after two weeks of monsoon rains – swarmed the skies and caused heavy damage to the exposed PAVN forces.[729]

RVNAF coordination and execution of supporting fires during this period demonstrated mixed results. After returning from being refitted in Hue, the 147th VNMC brigade used their recently replaced (by the US) organic 105mm and 155 mm artillery as an integral part of their defense with great effect.[730] No longer targeted as relentlessly by PAVN artillery as they had been in the initial days of the Easter Offensive, RVNAF artillery overall caused significant casualties for the PAVN as the RVNAF gunners supported the generally static line of battle.[731]

VNAF airpower also produced significant damage against the PAVN, but their ability to coordinate fire control from the air – a critical capability used extensively by the U.S. – was ineffective. While US forward air controllers (FACs) in light observation craft operated at or beyond the front lines to coordinate combat air support and air interdiction, their South Vietnamese peers refused to cover the forward edge of the battlefront and flew at high altitudes well to the rear. In contrast, however, a contemporary U.S. Air Force study found that the propeller-driven VNAF A-1 fighter-

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[728] Turley, 249.
[729] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 38.
[730] Turley, 255
[731] Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, *Command History 1972-1973 Volume II, Annex L: Quang Tri and Hue*, Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/617723/, L13.

bombers "performed in an exceptional manner", contacting RVNAF ground commanders when necessary and providing accurate tactical air support even when the weather precluded U.S. airstrikes.[732]

BG Giai's tight control of some of his most lethal airpower provided the ability to break up PAVN attacks, but otherwise, the inflexible RVNAF air support system proved unable to support offensive action. Prior to the offensive, BG Giai had established an overlapping series of two hundred target boxes for B-52 strikes. Personally allocating these strikes among his subordinate task force commanders based on their calls for support, Giai was able to direct a number of damaging attacks against the counter-attacking PAVN arrayed against the stationary RVNAF line.[733] However, RVNAF refused to advance on a number of occasions unless they could get saturation bombing in front of their positions.[734] Even when supporting fires were present, such as when U.S. air force airstrikes completely disrupted a major PAVN advance on April 19th, RVNAF troops clung to their defenses and refused to advance.[735]

Despite their own heavy casualties, the PAVN continued to reinforce their attack and gradually wore down the weary RVNAF defenders over two weeks, forcing a withdraw closer to Quang Tri City. In April 27th, the monsoon rains and overcast

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[732] David Mann, *The 1972 Invasion of Military Region I: Fall of Quang Tri and the Defense of Hue*, Headquarters, Pacific Air Force, Directorate of Operations Analysis, Project CHECO Reports, (March 15, 1973), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/98392, 34-35.
[733] Andrade, 130-131.
[734] Turley, 252.
[735] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*,39.

conditions returned, cutting off much of the RVNAF's critically needed air support. The PAVN took advantage of the weather and launched a general assault all along the line.[736]

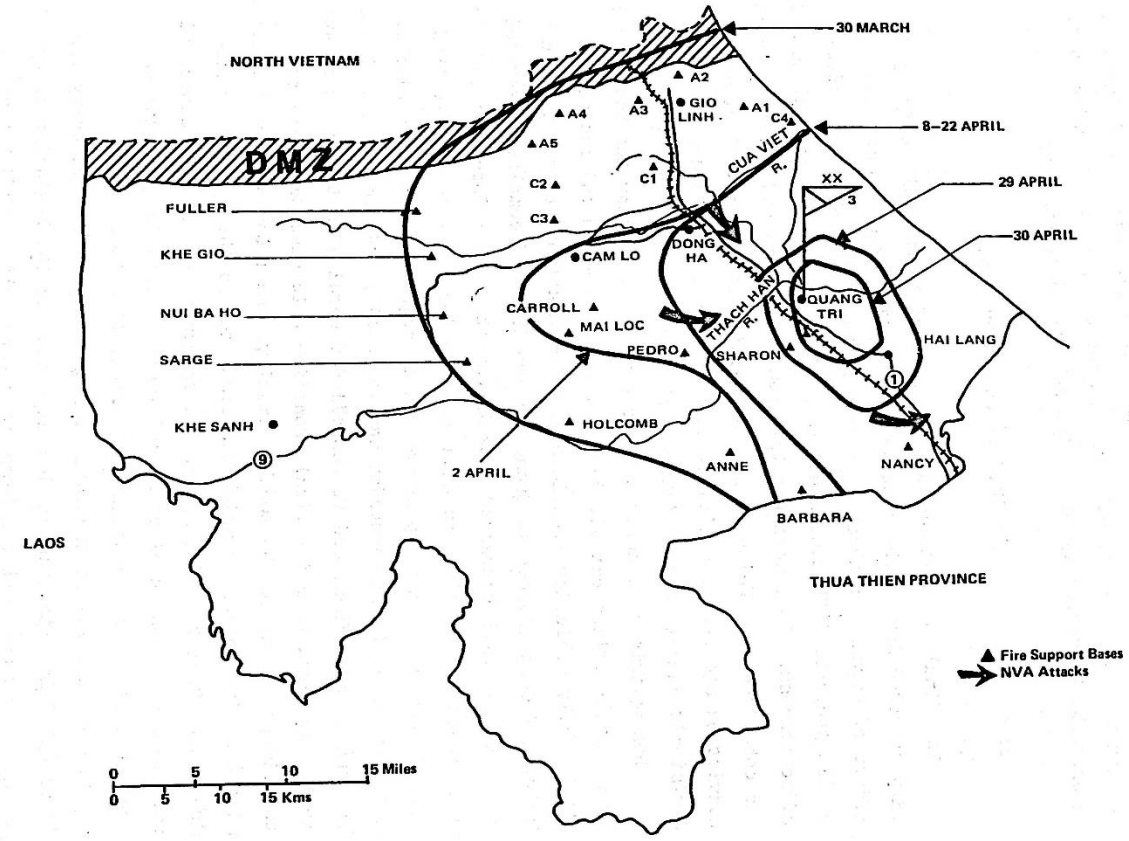

Figure 19: The 3rd Division's Shrinking Perimeter, April 1972[737]

The Fall of Quang Tri City

The RVNAF forces slowly withdrew into the city over the next three days, with the badly depleted ARVN withering under the PAVN's armor-infantry and heavy

[736] Turley, 259.
[737] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 42.

artillery assault. Unlike the Marine brigades, which had been rotating in and out and the four new Ranger Group reinforcements, the ARVN troops in northern I Corps had now been in near-continuous conventional combat for four weeks and the strain and shock had badly depleted their self-assurance and cohesiveness.[738] Except for the commander and his reconnaissance platoon, the remnants of the 57th regiment collapsed and fled south.[739] The 20th Tank Battalion held against repeated attacks armor and infantry attacks until the PAVN's first use of the newly fielded Sagger antitank missile surprised the ARVN tankers, caused heavy losses, and resulted in one company fleeing.[740] After repeated assaults, first the 43d Ranger Battalion and then the 20th Tank Battalion broke and ran without notifying their superiors or adjacent units.[741]

With the 147th Marine Brigade as his only remaining effective unit on April 30th, BG Giai ordered all of his forces except for this brigade to withdraw from Quang Tri City and form a new defensive line south of the city the next day. As the 3d Division began to withdraw, however, LTG Lam – who had been informed of the action the day prior – radioed forward to countermand the withdraw from Danang, and ordered BG Giai and his units to hold "at all costs". Although Giai rescinded his order and tried to maintain control, chaos quickly reigned.[742]

Within four hours the RVNAF defenses collapsed, although more than half of the units maintained an orderly withdrawal. Under heavy and continuous artillery fire, the 1st

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[738] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*,41.
[739] Troung, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 43.
[740] Turley, 257, 251.
[741] Turley, 261.
[742] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*,44.

Armored Brigade and three of the four Ranger groups conducted a retrograde through a series of blocking positions. Similarly, the 147th Marine Brigade conducted a fighting withdrawal towards the 369th Marine Brigade to the south, where a battalion of the 369th destroyed a number of PAVN tanks with LAWs in covering their retreat.[743] Regardless, the damage had been done – the RVNAF had been driven back behind the My Chanh river comprising the northern border of Thua Thien province and an entire province had been lost to the PAVN. It was a devastating defeat for South Vietnam.[744]

A New Commander Reorganizes I Corps

The loss of Quang Tri was a shock to both South Vietnamese and U.S. leaders and prompted major action. On May 1st, GEN Abrams reported to Secretary of Defense Laird that "senior military leadership has begun to bend and in some cases break. In adversity it is losing its will and cannot be depended upon to take the measures necessary to stand up and fight."[745] Abrams was concerned with the inability of not only LTG Lam, but also with the commanders of the 2d and 3d Corps and several division commanders to direct large-scale conventional combat operations. On 2 May, he and Ambassador Bunker met with President Thieu, and Abrams declared that ineffective RVNAF senior leaders were responsible for the defeat in I Corps and difficulties in the Central Highlands and III Corps, that his nation was in jeopardy, and that a change in field commanders could influence the outcome.[746]

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[743] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 46-47
[744] Turley, 300, 301.
[745] Cosmas, 361.
[746] Andrade, 142.

President Theiu responded rapidly and decisively. He summoned all of his Corps commanders and JGS leadership to a meeting in Saigon the next day. Immediately following the meeting, LTG Lam and the II Corps commander were replaced. LTG Truong from IV Corps was assigned as the new I Corps Commander, returning to the region where he had previously served with distinction.[747] Thieu also promoted VNMC commandant LTG Khang to the JGS, simultaneously placing a Marine in this body for the first time and thereby improving its joint nature and also removing a division commander who had been a challenge for effective I Corps command and control. COL Bui Thi Lan was promoted to brigadier general and became acting commandant and commander of the Marine Division.[748]

From observing the course of events in April, LTG Truong had actually anticipated this result and already selected a core of headquarters staff to move north with him. [749] As he later brutally stated, "I had served in I Corps under General Lam and the disaster that occurred there was no surprise to me. Neither General Lam nor his staff were competent to maneuver and support large forces in heavy combat."[750] Truong flew to Hue that afternoon and immediately established a corps forward headquarters in the city to restore confidence in his combat units.[751] Bringing a new energy to the command, Truong focused his initial efforts on rebuilding and retraining his forces and reorganizing his headquarters into an effective command and control element.

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[747] Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 363.
[748] Andrade, 160.
[749] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 53.
[750] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 50.
[751] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 53.

Over the next several months LTG Truong developed I Corps headquarters from virtual ineffectiveness to what the new 1st Corps senior advisor MG Cooksey described as "a reasonably effective (ARVN, VNAF, VNN) element, employing five divisions and supporting arms in conventional arms in conventional combat."[752] LTG Truong worked well with Americans, knew what they could provide and what he needed from them. The new commander remained with his forward HQ in Hue which he ensured was staffed with talented senior officers from all three services.[753]With American assistance the organization developed procedures and expanded staff capability for I Corps to effectively employ air, naval and artillery fire support. The new later organization proved its ability to effectively employ "the entire spectrum of ground, airborne, and amphibious operations."

One of LTG Truong's first task was to deal with the PAVN's deadly long range 130mm artillery. Truong believed that organizing and concentrating fire support was the key to building an effective RVNAF counteroffensive. He first established a fire support coordination center to coordinate and integrate all RVNAF and U.S. artillery fire, U.S. naval gunfire and tactical air support, with an initial priority to counterbattery fire support. Then he organized a Target Acquisition Element to "exploit the tremendous power of the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Naval gunfire."[754] He located all of these elements within his forward headquarters at Hue in order to better support his forces and also

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[752] Headquarters, 1st Regional Assistance Command, Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Major General Howard H. Cooksey" (January 25, 1975), Accessed from Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive at https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/617964, 3-4.
[753] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 53.
[754] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 53.

convinced the supporting U.S. 7th Air Force (despite their initial strong objectives against this logistically difficult move) to relocate their own coordination elements and collocate them with his own.[755] With these command and control structures established, Truong consolidated more than forty heavy artillery guns and then combined them with tactical air, B-52 strikes and naval gunfire into his "Thunder Hurricane" concept– concentrating their fire at one single point on the battlefield then another, day and night. Most enemy artillery was soon silenced and he then began to target the PAVN's extended logistical nodes.[756] Although fierce fighting continued on the western outskirts of Hue throughout the summer, the PAVN's impending attack to seize a second northern province had been neutralized and preparations could now begin for a counteroffensive.[757]

The next critical task was the reorganization of I Corps into an effective fighting force. While American logistics met the increased ammunition needs of his Thunder Hurricane, they also rushed badly needed tanks, APCs, artillery to refurbish Truong's units. In order to restore his units to combat readiness on the conventional battlefield, I Corps instituted a two-week "quick-recovery" training program was instituted and went on throughout the summer.[758] Combined South Vietnamese and U.S. mobile training teams conducted these courses for each battalion and all officers and NCOs were required to attend.[759] Some units took longer due to their extensive losses – the battered 20th Tank

[755] Mann, 56.
[756] Andrade, 161.
[757] Andrade, 164.
[758] Andrade, 165.
[759] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 61.

Battalion required a complete retraining and refitting cycle and the 3d Division was reconstituted and moved south to Danang in June.

A final task upon which LTG Truong embarked the creation of a more realistic chain of command and integrate his forces. On May 5th he gave the Marine Division headquarters under its new commander, BG Lan, responsibility for the northern sector of Thua Thien province while the two brigades of the 1st Division guarded Hue's western approaches and the 147th VNMC Brigade served as the Corps reserve. Lan was initially given his 369th and 258th NVMC brigades and territorial forces and later in the month was assigned the newly arrived 2d Brigade of the Airborne Division.[760]

Truong had requested the entire Airborne Division from the JGS to retake Quang Tri City and as the general situation in II and III Corps stabilized, these were gradually released to him. By the end of May all three brigades of the Airborne Division had reinforced I Corps and the Marine Division's original sector was split, with the Airborne Division northwest of Hue and the Marine Division to the northeast.[761]

Retaking Quang Tri City

LTG Truong encouraged his division commanders to conduct limited offensive operations as soon as they had reorganized into their new defensive sectors.[762] On May 13th, the 369th VNMC Brigade conducted a combined river crossing and air assault twelve kilometers deep into southeastern Quang Tri province, just ten kilometers south of Quang Tri City. The 3d and 8th VNMC battalions were air assaulted by USMC

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[760] MAC-V 1972-3 Command History, L-21; Mann, 56, 60.
[761] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*,56.
[762] Tuong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*,54.

helicopters into position and then swept south to link up with the third, which had crossed the river. [763] Supported by tactical airstrikes, U.S. Army Cobra attack helicopters and naval gunfire as well as the 369th's own artillery, the attack caught the defending 66th PAVN Regiment in a pincer movement and caused heavy casualties before the Marines pulled south to their original position.[764]

The attack demonstrated the professionalism that the Marines had exhibited during the earlier defense of Quang Tri, but which was now part of a much more effective whole. In the second landing zone the Marines fought through a hot landing zone where they were met with small arms fire. Later, the 3d Marine battalion successfully assaulted across 400 yards of open rice paddies under fire, pushed the PAVN from their defenses and then continued the attack while under mortar and automatic weapons fire. This was only a limited one-day operation, but it kept the PAVN off balance. Transitioning back to the defense the next morning, the 369th successfully withstood a PAVN armor infantry attack with LAW rockets and newly acquired TOW missiles in coordination with supporting ARVN armored cavalry and tactical airstrikes, although their screen of territorial forces initially broke under the attack. The PAVN was now facing a much more determined enemy all along their front and was now being steadily worn down, just as they had earlier wore down the RVNAF.[765]

Truong continued his attacks to keep the enemy off balance and now launched an amphibious assault. On 24 May, the 147th VNMC brigade, transported by USMC

[763] MAC-V 1972-3 Command History, L-21, Truong, 57.
[764] Andrade, 166.
[765] Andrade, 165-166;

amphibious landing craft from the 9th Marine Amphibious Group waiting offshore conducted the Vietnamese Marine Corp's first amphibious landing of their history. A B-52 strike hit the shore while the Marines were 2000 yards out, disrupting the PAVN defenders so that only ineffective mortar fire hit the VNMC battalion that assaulted the beach and killed fifty soldiers from the recently arrived 18th PAVN Regiment. An air assault with one VNMC transported by USMC another by VNAF helicopters and supported by US Army Cobra gunships landed unopposed and then drove off more PAVN elements. All three battalions then withdrew behind the My Chanh line just as in the earlier attack.[766]

By late June, Truong was ready for a general offensive and Operation Lam Son 72 was launched on June 28th with the goal of restoring government control to major portions of Quang Tri province and destroying as many enemy forces as possible.[767] A two-pronged attack drove northward with the Airborne Division as the main effort in the west and the Marine Division running eastward to the coastline.[768] Both units were supported by the 1st Ranger Group, and the 7th Armored Cavalry Regiment along with a continuous bombardment of B-52s, tactical air, and artillery. Although the attack began cautiously, the RVNAF units maintained a steady advance and the Airborne Division, moving by battalion level air assaults, reached the outskirts of the city on July 7th.[769] The PAVN was determined to hold Quang Tri City, however, and a ferocious battle now developed.

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[766] Andrade, 170-171; MACV 1972-3 Command History, L-23.
[767] MACV 1972-3 Command History, L-25.
[768] Mann, 68.
[769] Truong, 66-67; Andrade, 177, MACV 1972-3 Command History, L-31

For whatever reason, possibly due to political pressure to recover the city quickly, Truong chose to act against the advice of U.S. advisors and pursue a frontal assault against the well-entrenched defenders of the city rather than encircling and isolating them first.[770] The PAVN were determined to hold Quang Tri city and had arrayed themselves behind three rows of defenses culminating in Quang Tri's ancient Citadel, with extensive artillery support and tanks hidden in buildings throughout the city.[771] The Airborne Division's 2d Brigade led the assault, steadily advancing behind air strikes and working its way into the suburbs of the city in two days. For two weeks, the 2d Airborne then fought its way house to house and block by block and advanced to the walls of the citadel, using close air support and tanks to maintain its momentum.[772] Meanwhile the Marine Division airlifted a battalion to the northeast side of the city into a contested landing zone to interdict the city's lines of communication, although it was subsequently stopped in place by PAVN infantry and armor.[773]

Together with his 1st Division holding Thua Thien to the south and the two divisions conducting the assault in Quang Tri province to the north, Truong had three divisions against six PAVN divisions, which continued to reinforce Quang Tri City and launch attacks combined arms attacks along its flanks.[774] The Airborne Division's attack

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[770] Mann, 69. Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972,* In his monograph, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, Truong later stated that I Corps was "pushed by public opinion" (p. 67) and his senior U.S. advisor MG Cooksey noted in his final debriefing that President Thieu had "demanded the City be seized" and that "Quang Tri City, which was to be bypassed, suddenly became an emotionally inspired national objective" (p. 6).
[771] Andrade, 179, 186.
[772] Andrade, 180-181.
[773] Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 67; MG Cooksey Debriefing, 6.
[774] Troung, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 69.

stalled for two weeks on the outskirts of the Citadel and its forces could not break into the compound.[775] The assault had degenerated into a slugging match between two fairly equal opponents. Both the PAVN defenders and LTG Truong's I RVNAF utilized infantry backed by tanks and with extensive artillery. The PAVN benefitted from their greater numbers and I Corps from the continuous aerial assault supporting its efforts to claw back the city.

On July 27th, LTG Truong ordered the Marine Division – which had by this time had slowly fought its way around the PAVN defenses on the eastern and north sides of the city and cut into the PAVN's lines of communication – to replace the battered Airborne Division and continue efforts to seize the Citadel. For six more weeks, the Marines were equally unable to gain entry to the Citadel until a final push penetrated its walls on September 11th, with final control of the compound gained on September 15th. This represented the PAVN's final hold on the city, and the city was declared completely cleared on September 17th.[776] One of the bloodiest episodes of the war had been completed and the RVNAF in Northern I Corps had come back from the brink of defeat to achieve a decisive symbolic victory against greatly superior opposition. However retaking the city had exhausted two of South Vietnam's best divisions. I Corps was able to make limited gains north of the city through the end of the year, but the majority of the province remained in North Vietnamese hands through the end of the war.[777]

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[775] Andrade, 186.
[776] MG Cooksey Debriefing, 7.
[777] Mann, 70.

Analysis

The considerable variation of unit performance in I Corps during the Easter Offensive – sometimes within the same organization – shows the importance of quality leadership, command and control, and training.

At the senior levels, the clear differences in the performance of the I Corps Headquarters is a night and day example of the value of competent leadership. LTG Lam was selected for his position for his political reliability, not for his leadership qualities. His leadership weaknesses had already been demonstrated a year prior in Lam Son 719, but the political sensitivities of Hue, combined with an overall shortage of competent commanders at the most senior levels, likely led President Thieu to keep him in place after LTG Thi was killed the previous year.

In the desperate situation of the Easter Offensive, Lam's poor leadership had a tremendously damaging impact upon the RVNAF. He continued to fight his political battles against the Airborne and Marine commanders rather than cede them a part in the battle, which ended up placing an unmanageable burden on BG Giai's shoulders as he and his new staff were overwhelmed with the task of managing so many disparate units. His attempts to save face and withhold negative information from higher headquarters painted a much rosier picture to the JGS so that they were unaware of the depth of the problems facing the 3d Division during its most desperate situation. Finally, his vacillation between micromanagement of Giai's subordinate units and conflicting and senseless orders (such as his senseless order to stand fast at Quang Tri City) led to

confusion resulting in the collapse of much of the 3d Division rather than a fighting retreat towards Hue.

Despite the desperate situation in the north, President Thieu was only finally driven to change the I Corps leadership when American intervention in the form of pressure from the Ambassador and MACV commander forced him off the fence. The 1st Corps headquarters under LTG Lam was overwhelmed and unable to accomplish its assigned mission. Lam failed to integrate the disparate elements under his control into a coherent whole, issued inconsistent orders, and withheld critical information from his own superiors. For this reason, we can rate the I Corps headquarters as Lacking Basic Proficiency while it was under LTG Lam's command.

However, after later coming under the command of LTG Truong, the 1st Corps transitioned to demonstrating proficiency at Combined/Joint Operations. The corps headquarters was able to effectively coordinate multiple combined arms and integrate US air support.

Removal of LTG Lam and his replacement by LTG Truong brought a new focus on the merit-based selection of capable leaders in I Corps. One example is the elite team that Truong used to staff his corps headquarters. Another is the new 3d Division commander, BG Nguyen Duy Hinh, who replaced BG Giai after the loss of Quang Tri. Hinh was instrumental in rebuilding his reconstructed division into a capable fighting force. It is interesting note that a year later, the JGS rated the 3d Division as the best

ARVN division and the highly qualified Hinh was the only division commander promoted to major general in 1973.[778]

The 3d Division suffered from severe deficiencies in both command and control and training, which prevented them from operating at their full potential. From a command and control standpoint, BG Giai was saddled with the insurmountable task of attempting to manage more than nine brigade equivalent combat formations – the normal task of a corps headquarters – with only his own single division headquarters. Attempting to direct so many units in high intensity conventional combat operations and deal with all of their multiple problems and competing resource requests was a task that would have overwhelmed most regular division headquarters, let alone one that had only been formed six months before.

The most important problem with the 3d ARVN Division was that it was unready for combat. Divisions are large and complex organizations composed of multiple subordinate elements that all require familiarity with their own internal systems and processes in order to function effectively in the chaos and stress of combat. No matter how common a military's doctrine may be, the people in these organizations – most importantly their various levels of leaders – need to develop a degree of trust as well as an understanding of how to complete their various tasks in a synchronized manner. All of this requires training and repetition. By all accounts, BG Giai was furiously working to bring his units up to speed with an intense internal training schedule.

[778] Andrade, 163.

But trying to develop a cohesive organization where all the component parts know their jobs was not a task that could be accomplished while simultaneously providing an effective shield along South Vietnam's northern border. Part of training involves making mistakes and correcting them. Thus, the fact that the 56th and 57th units had shut their radios down during movement and were unable to react to enemy contact would have been something to improve for the future in a non-combat training exercise. Doing this in a real world transfer movement was inexcusable, however, and they were caught off-guard from the very beginning.

It should also be noted that many of the 56th and 57th Regiments new battalions had been through the training center at Phu Bai. After moving from the 2d Regiment to the 56th Regiment, however, one advisor observed "the units [of the 56th Regiment]" were not very well trained, motivated or ready for combat…this was a disaster looking for a place to occur."[779] This stint at the training doesn't seem to have impacted their performance, which speaks to many of the concerns that although South Vietnam may have had a large training infrastructure, the quality of the training there was substandard. In other words, we can surmise that while individual training (for example, rifle marksmanship and basic patrolling) may have been accomplished, the sort of battle-focused collective training that would have benefited an entire battalion organization (company and battalion level maneuvers) was either not conducted effectively or at all.

Overall, we can rate the performance of the 3d Division headquarters and at least the 56th and 57th as Lacking Basic Proficiency. In a different setting the much more

[779] Wiest, 241.

experienced 2d Regiment probably would have performed well given their prior performance. However, with the rest of the division falling apart around them, they were unable to stand out and we can't really assign them an independent rating.

One example of the very positive value that intensive training *can* provide is the performance of the 20th Armored Battalion during the earlier phases of the battle. Just prior to the battle, the 20th Armor had just come out of an intensive new equipment training process as part of being the first battalion in the ARVN to be issued the M48 main battle tanks. The new equipment training process involved both orientation to their new equipment as well as an extensive amount of hands-on gunnery training. This sort of battle focused training directly paid off as the battalion performed well in multiple engagements with both PAVN armor and infantry. Part of this likely due to the fact that the M48 was a superior tank to the M24 light tanks which the ARVN had previously been equipped – but only part. A key difference observed was that the M48s were directly engaging the PAVN rather than hanging back as had previously been a problem with ARVN armor.

In general, when under the control of their parent 1st Armored Brigade, there was still room for improvement in armor-infantry integration. However, when elements were detached under Vietnamese Marine control, the 20th Armor performed well in vigorously executing a combined arms attack at Firebase Pedro. One problem universally faced by South Vietnamese armored forces was how to face the advent of new anti-tank weaponry. According to a USMC advisor, the South Vietnamese tank and APC crewmen were "initially mesmerized" by the erratic AT-3 Sagger wire guiding missiles which caused

significant losses.[780] This was not a new dynamic in the early 1970s, however, and the dawn of anti-tank missiles. A year later in 1973, Israeli armored forces in the Yom Kippur war were similarly surprised by the tank losses caused from Sagger missiles. Overall, we can evaluate the 20th Armor at Basic Proficiency – the unit performed the standard tasks of an armor battalion well, but still had some room for improvement in combined arms integration. We can chalk up the superior performance at Firebase Pedro more to the VNMC leadership than the 20th Armor.

Another example of the positive impact of training is the mobile training teams which traveled from unit to unit as LTG Truong reorganized the I Corps and prepared it for offensive operations. This is also an example of positive American intervention. The joint U.S.-South Vietnamese training teams appear to have had a very positive impact upon the units of I Corps. This sort of intense focus with a very positive outcome, however, appears to be isolated to this time and place rather than spread across the RVNAF in a more enduring and institutionalized manner.

The South Vietnamese Marines – all units which had also performed well in Lam Son 719 – continued to perform well in the Easter Offensive, benefitting from strong leadership and prior experience. The Marines also benefited from the fact that they still retained advisors at the battalion level, which aided in their accessing U.S. air support as well as most particularly in helping to coordinate their later amphibious landing. The VNMC's strong leadership and ability to coordinate combined arms operations was shown when one of the brigade commanders stepped up and ran the 3d Division's fire

[780] Turley, 257.

support command post for several critical days while the other ARVN headquarters staff displaced to another location. Because they were more independent, the Marine brigades in the Quang Tri were less subject to the chaos in their 3d Division nominal headquarters.

At the same time, the VNMC brigades continued to double-check orders given from the 3d Division headquarters with their own division headquarters, which likely contributed to their general hesitancy when given the order to counterattack prior to the fall of Quang Tri. Once the Marine Division was command of its own forces, their performance also improved. There was no need to doublecheck orders since they were under their own services command and they served well under LTG Truong's command. It is also likely that the "promotion" of Marine Division commander LTG Khang to the JGS (concurrent with LTG Lam's removal) and his replacement by a newly promoted Brigadier General eased relations for LTG Truong, who seemed to have no trouble subsequently directing the actions of the Marine Division. This was another positive outcome of the U.S. leadership intervention with President Thieu.

During the operation, the VNMC demonstrated the ability to lead combined arms assaults, to conduct anti-armor ambushes with light antitank weapons, to conduct the first amphibious assault in their history, and effectively coordinate air and artillery in support of their operations. By maintaining a rotation of forces in and out of the direct combat area, the VNMC was able to keep up a much higher pace of operations than their regular ARVN peers. Based on this performance we can clearly rate the VNMC brigades as capable of Combined/Joint Operations. We can rate the Marine division headquarters at Basic Proficiency – most of the operations were conducted at single brigade operations

when under its overall command and LTG Khang's earlier micromanagement of his forces even when cross-attached outside of his command leaves room for improvement in joint operations with the ARVN.

As with the units of the Marine Division, the Airborne Division had gained significant experience operating as an entire organization in Lam Son 719 and this now paid off as they led Truong's counter-offensive north. The division worked well within the integrated system that Truong had developed. They effectively utilized VNAF helicopters to support their air assaults as well as using massive air and artillery support to maintain their movement. This is a notable difference from the 3d Division's earlier attempted counter-attack north of Quang Tri, which had had also benefitted from significant air support, but to no avail. This time, the air and ground forces worked together in an integrated fashion, however, and the advance moved steadily from Hue to Quang Tri City.

Unlike in previous operations such as Lam Son 719, the latter phases of the Easter Offensive saw the first development of a South Vietnamese system to coordinate joint air, naval gunfire and artillery support rather than relying on a purely U.S.-run system. First, this was the result of a commander such as LTG Truong coming into command who actually understood the necessity of integrating these capabilities. But these improvements were also the result of a major U.S. effort to help Truong develop and put into practice the systems necessary to coordinate these fires. The U.S. was finally not seeking to maintain control of these systems, but was instead helping to develop this

critical domestic capability. Truong would use this ability to direct joint fires to great effect in support of his counteroffensive.

As just mentioned, a critical component of the South Vietnamese ability to withstand and roll back the Easter Offensive was the massive fire support deployed against the North Vietnamese. Much of this came from U.S. airpower and U.S. naval gunfire. But the Easter Offensive also saw significant use of South Vietnamese airpower as well. As mentioned above, VNAF fighter-bombers were a vital component in combat air support throughout the campaign, however, the South Vietnamese forward air controllers that should have been directing these fires were not prepared for the intense anti-aircraft environment in which they found themselves and continuously refused to fly close support. The fighter-bombers had been involved in the earlier air campaigns in Cambodia, although generally called in by U.S. air controllers. They rose to the occasion in responding to the intense threat environment. The South Vietnamese forward air controllers were a new development. This is an example where previous exposure to these sorts of environments (ie field experience) – and/or a dedicated training effort for such environments might have prepared them for this sort of battlefield. Instead, by the U.S. filling this role exclusively and not prioritizing the development of this critical sort of enabling capability, they had impeded the South Vietnamese development this important future need.

Following the end of the Easter offensive, the U.S. raced to overcome the weaknesses that had been observed in the RVNAF. Further pressure was put on President Thieu to remove commanders, again resulting in a small amount of positive changes.

More M48 main battle tanks were transferred to the RVNAF and an intensive training program was performed to improve ARVN armor effectiveness. The continued transfer of combat aircraft to the VNAF and partnered training with the US Air Force continued to expand RVNAF air capabilities. But all of these efforts were soon ended. In January 1973, all U.S. forces were withdrawn. Not long afterwards, the flow of U.S. military assistance funding to South Vietnam was also ended. The time for the RVNAF was over. They were an uncompleted work in progress.

Meanwhile, the flow of Soviet and Chinese equipment and funding to the North increased, just as U.S. support for the South was ending. South Vietnam would collapse within two years following another North Vietnamese general offensive, this time without U.S. support. Given the fact that one side in this struggle (the North) was now receiving extensive assistance, just as support to the other (the South) was rapidly decreasing, analysis of this final conflict is less useful. South Vietnam was not simply fighting North Vietnam. It was fighting a North Vietnam with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of resources, while South Vietnam's hands were tied behind its back. Given this, the 1973 cease fire and withdrawal is an appropriate place to end this case study and draw lessons learned from the almost eighteen year period of U.S. security force assistance to South Vietnam.

Assessment – Period III: Vietnamization

During the final period of the war, building the RVNAF into a competent and effective force became the priority for the United States, resulting in major gains in effectiveness throughout the force. The primary vehicle for this improvement came

through partnering with U.S. forces. However, the U.S. also increased its efforts to impact RVNAF command and training, and to some degree in promotions and these efforts all produced relative gains in effectiveness. Unfortunately, the simultaneous and increasing drawdown of U.S. forces that occurred throughout Vietnamization reduced the ability of the U.S. to influence the RVNAF to an increasing degree as the period went on. Ultimately, this period of intensified efforts did not last long enough for the RVNAF to fully develop its capabilities.

Beginning with the counter-offensives after the Tet offensives, U.S. and RVNAF forces operated in close partnership in major combat operations, a dramatic reversal of the previous American policy that was universally recognized as producing effectiveness gains in partnered forces. Where U.S. forces were partnered with stronger RVNAF leaders, these gains were significant than where they were partnered with less competent South Vietnamese commanders. As RVNAF forces began to take the lead for major operations, differences in the quality of their commanders became more evident and President Thieu was more receptive to MACV intervention seeking major changes. However, with U.S. forces in the midst of withdrawing, the stakes for the RVNAF were now much higher. Previous cross-border restrictions were loosened, opening potential opportunities for victory that had not previously been present. However, the Allied forces were in a race against the clock of the U.S. withdrawal timetable. Battlefield failures that could earlier have been made up for were now now more damaging and the results could not be rectified.

While infantry units can be trained in a relatively short time to a low level of proficiency, the training and development of specialists and technicians demands a much longer period. With the accelerated transition, RVNAF technical services did not have enough qualified personnel to operate and maintain the large numbers of U.S. equipment that was being transferred. Rather than being fielded later in the conflict, these specialists should have started training early in the conflict.[781] Similarly, the development of command and control systems and processes takes time. This includes both the training and accrual of experience in unit staffs as well as the development of communications and fire control networks and experience in using them.

This is an area where the earlier reliance on U.S. capability substitution had the greatest impact. Previously, the RVNAF had relied almost exclusively on U.S. advisors and Forward Air Controllers to call in fire support – largely from U.S. artillery, helicopter gunships, and tactical and strategic bombers. Now South Vietnamese forward air controllers and commanders had to increasingly call for fire support, including the increasing use of VNAF aircraft. These systems slowly developed and were best used by those RVNAF personnel who had participated in combined arms alongside American forces for the longest period of time – particularly the 1st Division, Airborne, and Marine battalions and Rangers. For the majority of ARVN division staffs, many regimental staffs, and the Airborne and Marine Division headquarters, these command and control tasks were new. Aside from the small number of RVNAF forces which had been lucky enough to participate in regular combined operations with the Americans, the majority of

[781] Hinh, 758-759.

these RVNAF headquarters had not been utilized in pacification operations and so their learning curve was steep and unforgiving. Given a greater amount of time and partnered experience these problems might have been overcome, but that time was not available.

MACV intervention to promote the selection of competent officers remained limited, and the overall senior level American hesitancy to strongly exert their significant influence continued through their involvement. However, as described above, the greater RVNAF involvement in operations did provide GEN Abrams – and in some cases a few other senior advisors – with the opportunity to intervene and promote major positive action. Unfortunately, the bench of competent senior officers available to President Thieu remained limited and this only strengthened the inertia and political connections which already served to constrain his behavior.

As we have described in the exemplar battles above, however, strong and capable leaders did emerge in the RVNAF, driving major improvements in their subordinate organizations. In this particular war, the impact of chance (always present in any conflict) was significant and cruel to these emerging leaders, presenting the RVNAF with a devastating impact. Given their already limited bench, the loss of two stand-out corps commanders to helicopter crashes within less than a year was a blow from which the RNVAF could not recover. This is such a rare occurrence that in the United States military no similar level of losses have occurred since the Civil War and no model can account for this. The impact of aggressive and highly competent leaders such as LTGs Thanh and Thi upon the course of Lam Son 719 or in the initial phases of the Easter Offensive cannot be calculated.

Under Abrams, MACV – aware of the weaknesses throughout the RVNAF system - made major efforts to improve their command and control processes. Rather than simply being in communication – as had been the case beforehand - the physical co-location of Regional Assistance Groups with RVNAF corps headquarters was made to deliberately increase the sharing of U.S. processes. While this was a major improvement, the U.S. continued to monopolize planning efforts, hampering development of this critical capability. Once operations were underway, the U.S. commitment of liaison staffs to RVNAF headquarters at all levels ensured the passing of critical knowledge and experience. This was not a series of half measures, as was the case with promotions. U.S. commitment to RVNAF command and control was extensive and supportive. Unfortunately, the duration of time for this partnership was limited – as with all U.S. efforts during this period, and the transfer was still in progress at the time of complete American withdrawal.

For most of the period MACV leaders still believed that the U.S. would leave a significant residual force in South Vietnam even after the drawdown, which did influence some of their efforts. If they had been sure about the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces and absence of the availability of American airpower in the future, they might have prioritized South Vietnamese fire control processes to a greater degree and earlier. Despite the increasing integration, the RVNAF still largely depended on U.S. fire control systems for many capabilities through 1973.

The U.S. improved its focus on training during this period, but never achieved the same focus on realistic training at both the initial entry and unit level as would be

expected of American units and which was necessary for the South Vietnamese to meet their challenging threat environments. When Americans were a strong component of training efforts, such as new unit training, buddy training efforts, or mobile training teams, their efforts were universally assessed as providing improvements in effectiveness. However, the overall training system of the RVNAF remained deficient and on the job training during operations remained the most effective method. A series of training efforts did produce improvements, but the RVNAF had not fully adopted the U.S. model of intense and constant retraining by the time of the U.S. withdrawal.

Overall, this period showed that high levels of patron involvement *can* produce gains in weak state security force effectiveness. In terms of intervention in host nation organizational practices, promotions seems to bring the greatest impact, followed by command and control improvements, and with training intervention much further behind. The commitment of patron state combat forces in a comprehensive and partnered fashion clearly brings a significant impact in security force effectiveness, and concurrently produces opportunities for intervention in host nation organizational practices. Producing effectiveness gains throughout the length and breadth of a partnered client state does, however, appear to take a number of years, with the more complex command and control tasks taking the longest to master.

Evidence of other potential variables?

There again is little support for the warrior culture argument in this period. The overall ethnic and cultural makeup of the RVNAF remained the same and the RVNAF

achieved significant improvement overall, as well as even more significant improvement in particular units – all of which came from the same general cultural background.

During this period South Vietnam did begin to see an improving democratic system. However, this was a new process for its citizens and the security forces did not develop in a democratic system so consequently any relative contributions cannot really be adequately be measured.

Talmadge's assertion that clearly existential threats drive government action is again certainly at play here. Just as with the Tet offensive, the Easter Offensive drove government action. But again this explains only part, PART of the story. It's not simply the threat – it's the way in which the patron state takes advantage of that threat. And there are also other variables at play. The biggest difference in this period versus the previous periods contributing to gains in security force effectiveness appears to be the nature of U.S. combat commitment. Since the role of patron state is not generally a factor addressed by many authors addressing politicization, this seems to be a crucial failing in these sorts of approaches.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Although the United States' long-running efforts to develop the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces was ultimately a case of failure, it provides a wide variation of outcomes across various units and over the course of this endeavor. This provides an excellent means of examining the variables at play in these situations. Overall, this dissertation's in-depth examination of security force assistance to weak states and resulting variation in security force effectiveness has both theoretical implications as well as implications for current U.S. foreign policy, which will be explored in this final chapter.

Overall Assessment of the Vietnam Case Study

During the Diem administration (Period One), the US provided both advisors and extensive security assistance to South Vietnam. U.S. intervention in South Vietnamese organizational practices was primarily directed at training and equipping what evolved into the RVNAF (ie the 'training' organizational practice). The U.S. was also able to make some limited modifications in the command and control arena – first with the development of the corps commands and then with the later effort to combine corps and military region commands. Although U.S. leaders were concerned with the rampant cronyism and coup proofing practices of the Diem administration, improving promotions

and addressing many of the more extreme and dysfunctional command and control practices were not major priorities for the Military Advisory and Assistance Group.

Despite the immense expenditure of American resources to develop South Vietnamese-run training facilities, the resulting product fell far short of U.S. goals. RVNAF organizational culture largely discounted the value of either initial or recurrent training. Basic and individual training was rudimentary and recurrent training by organized units was rare, with the end result that both individuals and organizations rarely had the opportunity to practice in a battlefield environment other than actual combat operations. For much of the period, the U.S. paid little attention to half of the overall RVNAF force – the CG and SDC (later the RF/PF) responsible for population security, with the result that the first line elements facing the emerging PLAF threat was the least prepared.

As has been recounted earlier, the first significant U.S. intervention in command and control was the formation of corps commands alongside the existing regional command structure, further confusing an already inefficient and overlapping command and control system. As the internal threat increased, MAAG leaders were able to rectify this command and control inefficiency, combining these structures into a system that – while not an improvement over the original structure – at least did not cause further problems. Overall, however, they were stymied by a system deliberately shaped by President Diem to reduce threats to the regime rather than to produce victory on the battlefield.

The U.S. advisory effort in this initial period was a net positive, but the influence of tactical and organizational level advisors was too limited to fix the multiple problems endemic throughout the system. As the RVNAF evolved into a system emphasizing modern airmobile operations and the integration of tactical airpower, tactical advisors became a valued asset. As would be the case throughout the war, the input of small teams of U.S. advisors provided some of the only real training that many RVNAF junior officers and NCOs would ever receive.

However, the same advances that gave U.S. tactical advisors greater influence were applied in a manner that largely excluded the South Vietnamese. Rather than trying to develop a South Vietnamese capability to integrate airpower and control helicopter transport and attack capabilities, MAAG advisors retained these capabilities for themselves. At the time, the immense levels of dysfunction present in the RVNAF command and control structure would have made such efforts extremely difficult, but near complete U.S. monopolization of the control of such firepower would remain a central component for almost the entire remainder of the war. When the RVNAF command and control system began to slowly improve (in later periods), the U.S. dominance of these systems prevented development of the kind of independent South Vietnamese system that they would later need in order to survive on their own.

The battle of Ap Bac, detailed in Chapter Three, showed all the deficiencies present in the RVNAF of the time. Overlapping and competing chains of command and officers promoted purely through patronage rather than merit produced the inability for the RVNAF to integrate superior numbers and combined arms capabilities on the

battlefield. These same problems would be duplicated on numerous other occasions during the critical period in the early 1960s when the PLAF emerged in force throughout South Vietnam. As powerful as they were, the commitment of advanced American fire support and rapid helicopter transport were unable to overcome these problems. When Diem was subsequently replaced in military coup in 1963, this did not fix the dysfunctional command and control system, but rather made it worse as multiple RVNAF leaders struggled for power.

The U.S. decision to commit a large contingent of ground forces supported by extensive airpower in 1965 saved South Vietnam from being overrun by what had by that time become a full North Vietnamese invasion. However, the U.S. decision to assume independent control of major combat operations created new problems in this second period. Sidelined to the static pacification mission, the majority of higher headquarters in a sidelined RVNAF were unable to develop the requisite command and control practices required for independent South Vietnamese operations of their own.

U.S. influence surged during this period as massive American combat assets and immense numbers of personnel flowed into South Vietnam. With the new influx of American resources, MACV commander GEN Westmoreland sought a dramatic restructuring that would have integrated the RVNAF and American command structures in a structure analogous to that used effectively to control joint US-ROK-United Nations operations in Korea. However, when the RVNAF leaders at the top of their collective national leadership structure opposed this plan, President Johnson and other U.S. leaders were hesitant to use their influence to pressure the South Vietnamese into accepting this

change and instead chose the path of least resistance. Other advisory leaders such as Komer and Abrams would raise the issue again during this second period, but each time they failed to gain the national level support to achieve the level of pressure and conditionality necessary to force through such a change. This often overlooked case where U.S. leaders chose not to use high level influence and press for a combined leadership solution appears highly significant.

American leaders were similarly either unwilling or unable to push through major leadership changes during the majority of this period. The single exception to this was in the aftermath of the Tet offensive, when MACV placed immense pressure on President Thieu leading to the replacement of several key leaders. By contrast, American organizational advisors working with the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff *were* able to push through a number of systemic changes that made small changes to professionalize the promotion system. Rather than rapid changes, however, these were long term generational changes to the promotion of junior and mid-level leaders whose impacts would have taken long years to take effect.

Faced with resistance in establishing a combined command and control structure and observing extreme weaknesses in the RVNAF structure, the U.S. chose to pursue an independent U.S. role in combat operations during the critical 1965-1968 period that sidelined the RVNAF and which appears to have had the greatest impact on the resulting outcome of the war. For a highly professional military like that of the U.S. the decision to take the more difficult mission of directly confronting communist main force units in “the big unit war” likely seemed like a higher calling at the time. Certainly it made things

simpler for the U.S. than what would have seemed like a much more difficult task of dragging their less proficient partners around in operations that were highly challenging even for the U.S. and which were sending high numbers of casualties home to America.

Giving the RVNAF combat responsibilities of their own or having to rely on partnered South Vietnamese forces to protect American lives or risk the accomplishment of the missions might have seemed a much riskier endeavor at the time. The American desire for speed and simplicity, however incurred serious long term problems. While a more partnered strategy with the RVNAF would almost certainly would have lengthened the amount of time required to perform clearing operations and might have involved the potential for tactical defeats, *NOT* doing this likely compromised the entire war effort. Rather than saving American lives, such a strategy likely caused their sacrifice to be in vain when South Vietnamese forces later proved incapable of matching their North Vietnamese adversaries on their own.

The Tet offensive highlights the problem of placing the RVNAF in a static, tertiary role rather than as a major component of the security effort – the failure to place the kind of stress on the RVNAF organizations that would have forced South Vietnamese national leaders to make major structural changes. In the three southern CTZs, RVNAF and U.S. forces operated largely independently of each other. Unlike the highly mobile operations pursued by the Americans, the pacification mission left the majority of RVNAF units largely static with the exception of a few more elite forces such as the Airborne and Ranger battalions.

By contrast, the Tet Offensive forced American and South Vietnamese units into a new period of greater coordination and cooperation. Years of atrophy had allowed senior officers to continue focusing on political maneuvering since American advisors helped take care of the routine planning operations necessary to drive battalion and lower operations. Overall the RVNAF performed well, as these lower level units performed their necessary defensive missions and linked in with their American counterparts. However, the period of heightened operations that came after Tet showed the significant weaknesses that existed in the command and control abilities of many of these headquarters. U.S. pressure was able to force changes in some of the most egregious leaders that were now thrust into the spotlight. However, a great deal of fragility remained present throughout the headquarters staffs throughout the RVNAF.

In the two northern provinces, however, the U.S. Marine corps units in III MAF pursued a very different approach from the U.S. Army forces to their south – partnered operations with the 1st Infantry Division and local territorial forces. With greater exposure to the more professional practices of the Americans, as well as a higher pace of more complex operations that required greater levels of command and control, the RVNAF in the north developed at a much faster level than their peers to the south. U.S. officers also consistently praised the highly effective 1st Division commander, helping support his more merit-based practices. This effectiveness was shown in the Battle of Hue in 1968, where the 1st Division was able to perform well largely on its own and face the challenge of first surviving and then launching an immensely difficult urban counteroffensive.

The post-Tet Allied counteroffensives and a leadership change in MACV produced an entirely different approach in Period Three, the final years of the war. During the end of 1968 and throughout 1969, the U.S. completely reversed its approach and placed a major effort on closely partnering *all* of its forces and focusing them on developing the RVNAF into a competent force. This produced gains in RVNAF capability, although with a split character – units with more competent higher level commanders matured at a much faster rate than those with less competent leaders. Unfortunately, this major change in the U.S. approach to security force operations was soon followed by a rapid drawdown of U.S. forces that soon led to a decreasing American ability to partner.

Beginning in early 1970, some units of the RVNAF began to launch independent operations. In the first major example explored in Chapter Five, Operation Toan Thang 42 was driven by the confidence of South Vietnamese in the capabilities of the III and IV Corps Commanders and subordinate formations, leading to operations driven largely by South Vietnamese initiative. Over time, however, the decreasing American footprint led to an American push for daring RVNAF operations designed to change the course of the war. Operation Lam Son 719 was again a closely partnered operation leveraging American and RVNAF strengths to the best degree possible. But the operation was also extremely risky and the size and complexity of such an operation was well beyond the capabilities of the RNVAF commander and staff – I Corps – to which it was assigned and led to a devastating impact.

If the RVNAF had been introduced into major combat operations earlier, working together with US combat units and receiving critical "training" opportunities, then they might have been better prepared for the challenge of Lam Son 719 in 1971. Instead, senior RVNAF leaders who had never before coordinated operations of such scale and magnitude – even in less complicated circumstances – were thrust into a large and complex offensive with many critical pieces that proved overwhelming in the face of strong NVA resistance.

As has been discussed earlier, the American approach in the final phase of the war was much more successful than any other period. Partnering led to a much greater cross-pollination of U.S. and South Vietnamese at all levels, but particularly at the crucial command and staff levels of RVNAF headquarters which were in such need of command and control experience. In addition to emulation of U.S. practices, the greater visibility of these operations also produced the chance for high visibility inadequacies and failures which U.S. leaders could seize on to drive critically needed changes in some senior headquarters. When combined with the ground-up organizational changes that were slowly being implemented as a result of JGS-advisor driven organizational changes and from the greater experience driven by partnered operations this led to a significant level of improvement.

However, these changes were too little and too late. Throughout the war senior U.S leaders refrained from pushing through critically needed organizational (command and control) changes and were generally hesitant to push senior leadership changes

except in relatively rare circumstances. When high level changes did occur, however, they appeared to have a major impact.

Instead, the U.S. pursued a more bottom level up strategy. Over time, a new breed of more competent officers – many of the best of whom had 'grown up' as military officers working closely with their American counterparts –began to work their way up the chain of command, but it took time for these officers to gain senior rank. As mentioned previously, this was time that South Vietnam did not possess.

Theoretical Insights Section

So what does this in-depth examination of the Vietnam case study indicate about the primary model and other potential variables identified in Chapter Two? Clearly, leadership is a critical factor producing variation in security force effectiveness. Many of the primary and intermediate variables directly impact leadership – either through the selection of leaders, the processes in which they exercise control (command and control), or through their exposure to more professional forms of organizational practice. (commitment of combat forces). Although the training variable is largely organized at the individuals who make up an organization and the collective training of these units as a whole, the training of leaders is also applicable as well.

Which organizational practice or mix of practices is more important?

Training appears to be a baseline requirement. This is something that seems to be inherently understood and is the standard intervention when patrons provide security force assistance. However, training alone does not seem to be enough. Or, more correctly, the Chapter Two assertion that "complex training that simulates potential

battlefields, emphasizes realism, initiative, and involves multiple combined arms (ex: infantry, armor, intelligence), and joint (army, air, police) elements working together is more likely to produce greater effectiveness" holds true. Unfortunately, this high level of training used in highly professional security forces appears difficult to replicate in weak states. The Vietnam case study clearly shows that lesser quality – ie less realistic or demanding training – is less likely to significantly contribute to effectiveness.

The case study shows that training can be accomplished in different ways. The key in increasing effectiveness – as with most other variables – is to spread the impact of quality training across the widest possible set of recipients. Advisory assistance was universally mentioned as a form of training. It not only produced emulation, but also sometimes involved training on particular skills. However, such instances appear to be fairly limited in scope. Mobile training teams appear to have been a very successful way to mitigate weaknesses in host nation training proficiency. When utilized, largely later in the Vietnam War, this approach appears to produce a positive impact.

Unlike training, major efforts to improve host nation command and control appear much more likely to produce a reciprocal impact. The decision to focus on embedding U.S. liaison teams and large advisory staffs inside of RVNAF headquarters on a regular basis during the final period appears to have made a major impact upon the partnered units. It would seem that the multiple mid-war efforts to create a combined U.S.-RVNAF command structure would have produced major improvements in command and control, but this cannot be tested. Similarly, when MACV made efforts late in the war to place South Vietnamese officers alongside the U.S. forward air controllers or in command and

control aircraft alongside the U.S. personnel doing the same mission this made a major impact. Any time efforts are made to increase "host nation" capabilities, processes, and systems, this would appear to have a significant effort. Conversely, however, when U.S.-only processes are substituted in place of host nation capabilities for a "quick fix" solution, this results in very little improvement in host nation effectiveness. Finally, all intervention is not positive. Sometimes host nation efforts – no matter how well meaning – do not simplify processes, but rather increase dysfunctionality – as was the case with the U.S. creation of duplicate corps-level command and control structures in the late 1950s.

Another dynamic shown by the eventual U.S. implementation of the CORDS program is that the ability to influence client/partner state command and control is a product of the patron state's own command and control processes. If the patron's efforts are redundant and overlapping or lack centralization this results in the diffusion of the impact of patron influence and assistance.

Finally, it would appear that intervention to influence the selection of leaders for merit (i.e. "promotion") has the most significant and rapid impact upon host nation security force effectiveness. The increasing selection of leaders for merit – particularly of senior leaders – as the conflict went on produced a major positive impact. While South Vietnam's pool of quality senior officers was limited and further reduced by combat fatalities, the presence of competent leaders clearly resulted in a greater ability to achieve combined arms and joint forces integration on the battlefield. The impact of leadership is certainly nothing new in the study of history or security studies and it is reinforced in this

study. The higher up, the leader, the greater their impact. As the case study shows, competent leaders have a cascade effect, improving the quality of those underneath them. A key example of this is during the 1969 Dong Tien and Pair Off programs where during key periods of partnered efforts or RVNAF-led major combat operations, organizations with more competent senior leaders experienced a much higher growth of effectiveness across these organizations. The U.S. did not choose to exert its influence often, but when it did, usually during periods of major RVNAF operations, the U.S. was often able to sway President Thieu towards more merit-based selections.

The impact of the commitment of patron state combat forces upon security force effectiveness.

One of the key contributions of this dissertation is the examination of a variable rarely covered in security studies in relation to military or security force effectiveness – the role of the commitment of patron state security forces.

In general, advisory operations appear to provide a small positive impact upon their host nation partners. However, their impact is small. When matched against the corrosive influence of a weak state government, an advisory presence doesn't appear to provide a significant enough impact. This is not to say, however, that advisory presence when combined with the more powerful aspects of significant patron state intervention in client state organizational practices might be enough to make a difference

Independent operations – patron state efforts to sideline host nation forces and win the war on their behalf – provide a major negative impact upon the development of security force effectiveness. One of the key components of training is 'on the job

training,' otherwise simply known as 'experience.' When host nation security forces are sidelined, they obviously don't gain experience, but this case study shows that the impact of being sidelined in the naturally politicizing nature of a weak state does much more. Not being involved in operations leaves staffs with nothing to do and commanders with nothing to prevent them from being drawn into political activities. Additionally, the case study demonstrates that command and control skills, processes and procedures are subject to atrophy. Coordinating and integrating combat operations is not like riding a bike – it takes practice. Without being used, these skills slowly degrade, and must be rebuilt again through use.

The opposite of independent operations is the partnering of host nation and patron state forces in major combat operations, which the case study demonstrates has a major positive impact upon security force effectiveness. Partnering creates a large number of individual engagements between host nation and partnered security force personnel where the professional practices of the patron state are emulated by those of the host nation. The greater the size of the patron state partnering element, the greater the size of the impact. In particular, since a large degree of security effectiveness comes from the synchronization of various battlefield elements, partnering in command and control nodes such as headquarters or fire control centers provides the greatest impact. Time is clearly a factor here as well. The longer the interaction, the greater the impact. This is not just for this variable, however, the longer that any of these variables are exerted upon the host nation security force, the greater the impact.

What combination of these variables leads to success?

In the absence of the politicizing impact of a weak state host nation government, any of these (other than independent operations) would likely provide at least some positive impact in host nation security forces. The normal model of U.S. security force assistance would seem to hold true for most non-weak state cases.

But security force assistance in weak states requires a significant patron state impact to produce a long term impact. Otherwise any impacts are likely to be short term at best. The combination of both Organizational Intervention and Combat Force Commitment appears to have a mutually supporting benefit as well. But just having both does not seem to be enough.

At the lower (and, unfortunately, easier) end of the spectrum, intervention only in training and/or only providing advisors does not appear to be enough. As we move our way up the spectrum of 'greater patron state interference,' advisors plus training and command and control interference also does not appear to be enough. Given the strong impact of even small patron state interference in promotions, it would seem that a patron state that intervenes significantly across all they key aspects of organizational processes alone would seem to be enough to produce lasting improvements. The impact of this would likely be speeded along by the simultaneous commitment of advisors – certainly at the organizational level, since these would likely be the way in which intervention is applied. Finally, extensive partnering efforts would speed the above process along even faster and in combination with extensive command and control intervention might also be enough. It is hard to conceive that U.S. leaders would allow extensive and long running

partnering efforts without some simultaneous effort to also secure improvements in training command and control (inherent in partnering anyways) and to at least some degree in promotions. Most importantly, the case study shows that none of these efforts, no matter how promising, are 'quick fix' solutions. They will all likely take years to produce a satisfactory impact, *but* the combination of multiple and more intensive interventions is much more likely to produce not only a faster, but a longer lasting and more sustainable impact.

The explanatory value of other variables in weak state security force assistance?

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of variables which authors have highlighted and which have been discussed in this study.

Culture is clearly a factor as has been discussed above with this studies examination of how organizational culture in the RVNAF changed over time due to structural impacts. But other sorts of 'national culture' approaches seem to fall short in explanatory value for this case study.

Even if the North and South Vietnam possessed significant cultural differences (and certainly *some* difference was clearly discussed by observers at the time, this does not seem to explain variations in effectiveness. If the North possessed a superior warrior culture, than PAVN units and those PLAF units with large northern compositions should have been consistently superior to their RVNAF units throughout the war. Additionally, if this was the case we would expect to see all – or at least the overwhelming majority – RVNAF units exhibiting the same shortfalls. However, when examining this case study over three different periods, shows that this is not the case. Instead, from Period II

onward the RVNAF began to exhibit significant variation across the force, depending on other factors. This would not be the case in a 'warrior culture' example, so this approach appears to suffer in explanatory value.

Additionally, this variation in later periods *within* the RVNAF seems to discount the value of a 'culture lag' approach. As described above, U.S. trainers and advisors did find it difficult to adapt to South Vietnamese culture and vice versa. However, different RVNAF units – all from the same culture – later began to diverge in effectiveness. As with the above explanation, a 'culture lag' explanation should have applied to most if not all of the RVNAF and so this approach also appears to suffer in explanatory value.

As with the previous two variables, there is not enough evidence for democratization to have an impact. This does not necessarily discount its applicability. Even at the end of the case study, South Vietnam was a new and fledgling democracy. Since *all* South Vietnamese came from the same government type, the degree of within-case variation this would appear to discount this approach. However, it remains to be seen if longer term exposure to democracy would have produced impacts over time. Therefor we cannot completely discount this variable's applicability for security force assistance, we can simply say that it does not appear to be at play for this particular case.

Politicization is definitely a factor in weak state security force effectiveness. There is no question about this. The case study clearly shows the corrosive impact of politicization upon all aspects of organizational practices, most particularly upon the selection of competent leaders as well as upon an efficient command and control system.

However, simply ignoring the impact of the patron state in cases of security force assistance seems to miss a crucial part of the picture.

The Vietnam case study clearly demonstrates that the patron state also has a vote in the process, but that this depends on how the patron applies its influence and resources. Periods I and II in this case study show two different host nation strategies (different mixes of the key variables) which did not produce sustainable improvement for large portions of the RVNAF. However, the subcase of III MAF as an outlier during Period II and the overall U.S. approach in Period III *did* produce changes in effectiveness that analysis based solely on politicization cannot explain. As this study has shown, efforts of some of these approaches to explain variation through distance from the capital or in times of existential threat, while helpful, also fall far short of truly explaining the mechanism at work. Rather than a sole explanation, conceptualizing the politicizing force as just one half of a 'tug of war for effectiveness' seems a much better explanation of the actual mechanism at play.

How Advisors and Partnered Forces Create Temporary Improvements in Security Force Effectiveness

Another key contribution of this dissertation is a focus on the impacts of 'capability substitution' upon security force effectiveness in cases of security force assistance. Capability substitution is the short term substitution of patron state capabilities in order to achieve immediate impact upon the battlefield rather than developing these capabilities over the long term. This may be an acceptable outcome –

however, the use of this substitution creates a crutch for both the patron *and* the host nation security force.

Advisors often come with unique capabilities - a link to patron state assets that are not normally available to the client state as well as the more highly effective forces of the patron. They also often bring special skills and communications gear that allow them to access these capabilities as well as a better understanding of the associated processes involved in their use. Alternately, they may perform functions such as planning or coordination, replacing the need for the client to perform them on their own.

When capability substitution occurs on the battlefield, it creates temporary increases in the security forces effectiveness of the client state forces with which they work. These are not true pictures of the actual effectiveness of the host nation force – instead they are a combination of both the patron and host nation effectiveness.

Depending on the way in which patron state personnel are taught to use or simply exposed to the use of these capabilities, this may or may not produce a lasting outcome. When host nation security force personnel are actively involved in these processes, a degree of improvement rubs off on them. However, when these functions are exclusively performed by the patron, there is little chance of improvement due to a lack of knowledge. In some cases, when advisors substitute themselves and exclusively perform roles that should normally be accomplished by client state personnel – such as planning or coordination between adjacent or higher units, they may actually impede the normal development that would occur through repeated performance of such tasks.

Whether these changes are temporary or more sustained depends whether the host nation has the time to acquire these capabilities and then develop the commensurate processes and systems necessary for their effective use on its own.

Policy Prescriptions

There are a number of important takeaways that result from applying this model as a lens to guide U.S. foreign policy. First and foremost, the tug of war with a weak state client requires significant intervention by the patron in order to achieve sustainable results in security force effectiveness. This intervention must be targeted and leaders must be willing to commit to intervene with our clients organizational practices in order to achieve results. If this is not politically feasible or if leaders do not judge this worth the commitment of resources, then serious thought must be given to avoiding such an endeavor altogether – unless commitment to a status quo, unending, and un-improving quagmire is an acceptable foreign policy option.

This model shows the importance of targeting partnered organizations – not just their tactical assets. The U.S. military currently pursues extensive training and education efforts with a number of partners around the world. While such engagements may be useful from the standpoint of relationship building or maintenance, they are unlikely to result in substantive improvements in the effectiveness of weak state partners. To achieve this requires additional investment targeting in their command and control and personnel practices.

Combat Force Commitment requires close partnership. Partnered operations are critical and combined rather than separate command relationships should be sought

wherever possible. However, this requires significant political commitment on the part of the patron, possibly including a great deal of arm twisting of the client to achieve a combined command arrangement. The U.S. military's new 'By, With, and Through' policy appears to be a positive outcome resulting from lessons learned from U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Coalition forces spent extensive time pursuing independent operations during much of these campaigns that did not aid in building partner capacity.

However, in pursuing 'partnered operations' the U.S. should be careful of pitfalls of capability substitution. For example, U.S. military advisors assisted Iraqi Security Forces in the campaign to retake Mosul from 2016-2017. These advisors provided the advanced communications and targeting gear necessary to call in precision fires from American unmanned aerial vehicles, strike aircraft and artillery that were critical to allowing the Iraqis to advance and defeat entrenched ISIS forces in a difficult urban terrain. With U.S. assistance, the Iraqi forces were able to operate at the level of "Combined Arms/Joint Operations." Iraqis *did* participate in the planning and were part of the combined effort in which these capabilities were used. However, American personnel rather than Iraqis directed American precision strike assets conducting the attacks using American communications and targeting gear.

Should the Iraqis acquire such capabilities in the future, we can assume that the exposure of some of their personnel to the processes (i.e. through *emulation*) involved in the use of U.S. precision fires capabilities will provide at least *some* future benefit. However, they would also need to be trained on how to use these individual weapons

systems, would have to practice the integration of the multiple elements (planning, observers, targeting systems) necessary to put these capabilities into use, and develop the command and control system necessary to coordinate their use.

The bottom line with such involvement is that their benefits are generally only temporary. In stronger states, this might produce just enough of a spark to inspire host nation forces to innovate and develop the improved organizational practices to support their use. In weak states, however, without associated patron state efforts to target and intervene in the host nation organizational practices to produce necessary changes, such involvement is likely to only produce temporary improvements that will rapidly disappear following the departure of the patron state.

Depending on the desired outcome, such temporary benefits might be an acceptable endstate. However, they should not be confused with true partnering efforts designed to produce long term improvements in host nation security force effectiveness and instead should simply be viewed as short term efforts designed to work around host nation shortfalls.

Executing operations over an extended duration may not be absolutely critical, but can help amplify smaller footprint operations or help counteract previous shortfalls. Again, however, simply providing untargeted assistance for a long duration doesn't produce results. The reverse (more limited time) requires a major commitment of resources targeted to apply across the spectrum. An example not covered in this dissertation would be the US-Republic of Korea relationship in the Korean War from 1950-1953. Although a pre-existing training mission existed, it had not produced

significant results (similar to Chapter Three but with far less U.S. resources). However, after working as part of a combined multinational command under U.S. leadership, with partnered units, extensive advisory presence and training assistance, ROK forces at the end of the conflict, although not yet the equal of their First World peers, were generally effective military forces capable of standing up to their Chinese adversaries. Yes, the U.S. remained behind for a long time afterwards, but there is no question that significant improvement had occurred in ROK effectiveness.

One approach that would appear to hold significant opportunities for rapid improvement in the development of command and control practices is the use of a combined or integrated patron state and host nation command structure. As mentioned earlier, this proved highly useful in the Korean War. In the Vietnam War, such a combined command and control system would likely have placed much greater pressure on the South Vietnamese to correct their own problems. This also would have provided much greater interactions between U.S. and South Vietnamese staffs and commanders, influencing the South Vietnamese towards more professional practices of the Americans. The overwhelming examples of partnering discussed in the case study show that working side by side with the Americans led to the adoption of more professional practices.

In its more recent long-running engagements in both Iraq and Afghanistan the U.S. again chose to focus on simplicity and efficiency rather than prioritizing the more politically complicated combined command structure. Despite the inherent challenges in implementing such a structure, the benefits seem significant given the similar shortfalls experienced in developing host nation security forces in each of these endeavors.

Another potential point for consideration raised by this study is the continuing U.S. focus on the development of elite units in host nation security forces. In South Vietnam, elite units such as the Airborne, Rangers, and Marines were often the unit of choice to partner with for both American and regular ARVN units. The U.S. has similarly continued this practice in Iraq and Afghanistan with the creation of special operations forces that subsequently have been used as the lead elements for almost all host nation operations following transition of authority from the U.S.

There is a natural desire to create units more responsive to immediate operational use by the patron state. But this leads to the natural desire to use them piecemeal alongside US units rather than focusing more holistically and building more competent larger formations. This was the same problem in South Vietnam. While these elite units eventually became far more competent than the majority of their peers other than the 1st Division, their limited numbers led to them being used over and over again and suffering heavy attrition. This is no different in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

By contrast, while the U.S. military certainly has Rangers and special operations forces, it doesn't expect them to lead all regular combat operations. While elite units will likely have a role in the development of future partner forces, U.S. planners should balance their development against the benefit of building a broader and more competent set of regular forces.

This model also impacts a number of ongoing initiatives. The U.S. Army's security forces assistance brigades seem like an excellent resource for partnered operations. However, where is the matching organizational structure to impact the

client's generating force and executive functions? Absent this capability, our ability to provide lasting change seems quite limited. Will there be greater push for combined command structures in the future? This doesn't seem to be a priority. Recent U.S.-Iraqi operations were clearly partnered, but did not merge command structures.

The U.S. military's long-running State Partnership Program pairs state-level National Guard organizations with other nations. These partnerships benefit from long relationships with recurring engagements over a long duration, although the number of contacts varies by the particular relationship. However, as the name of the program implies, such relationships generally are focused at the partnership level and lack the ability to incentivize organizational change. On its own this program may produce resulting improvements in effectiveness for moderate or strong states security forces, but appears unlikely to be a tool to improve weak state security force effectiveness. These could, however, be tools in a more comprehensive SFA approach using multiple assets in combination with each other.

Areas for Future Research

The exploration of variables related to security force assistance and the Vietnam case study in this dissertation have provided a comprehensive approach showing variation in outcomes of the dependent variable produced by different combinations of the independent variables. However, this study also identifies a number of potential avenues for future research to explore related topics and to provide greater breadth and variation in the independent variables at work in cases of weak state security force assistance.

The concept of “capability substitution” in security force assistance relationships has been brought out as a major issue in this study. Considering the frequency in which security patrons make use of proxy forces in general and the relative importance which these have in our contemporary international security environment, this seems like a very important factor deserving of closer examination.

This study has postulated the existence of both a weak state model as well as a strong state (or at least a “stronger state”) model of security force assistance. An excellent topic for further study would be the side by side comparison of SFA cases for both weak and strong states. This could further confirm the existence of two separate models as well as potentially identify whether any SFA inputs in strong states produce positive improvements or rather there is a threshold necessary to produce significant gains.

In the discussion of the impact of culture upon the South Vietnam case study in Chapter Three, one of the issues that arose was the differences between French and American military cultures and how this had an impact in early U.S. efforts to professionalize the RVNAF. In subsequent years, the steadily expanding U.S. presence became the primary cultural input on the RVNAF, however this remains a subject for further examination. Future work might perform side by side comparisons of one country with U.S. SFA along with SFA efforts by others to see how differences in military organizational culture might produce different outcomes.

In this study, the U.S. was the dominant patron providing security force assistance. However, Australian advisors also had a smaller role, serving either alongside U.S. advisors or with nearby units to their operational zone. Just as the different USMC

approach in III MAF is examined in this study, future studies could focus more on the different Australian experience in South Vietnam or in cases where multiple security partners provided security force assistance to the same host nation at the same time.

Finally, the policy prescriptions section made reference to different U.S. security force assistance approaches in South Korea as well as similar approaches in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rather than the deep dive approach focusing on depth presented in this study, a supporting subsequent effort could look at other cases of U.S. security force assistance along with South Vietnam, comparing similarities and differences in various approaches and how this resulted in different or similar outcomes in security force effectiveness. Such an approach would provide further variation to further explore the impact of such common effectiveness variables such as the warrior culture, culture lag, democratization and politicization approaches examined in this study alongside the primary independent variables.

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BIOGRAPHY

Originally from Gahanna, Ohio, Jerad Harper received his Bachelor of Science in Political Science from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1993 and was commissioned as an armor officer in the U.S. Army. He subsequently transferred to become a strategic intelligence officer and remains on active duty today where he currently teaches at the U.S. Army War College. His career includes 3 deployments to Iraq, one to Afghanistan, and one to Bosnia. He received his Master of Arts degree in Public Administration from Minnesota State University, Mankato in 2004, a Master of Science degree in Strategic Intelligence from the National Intelligence University in 2006, and a Masters degree in Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College in 2015.