

# Viet Guerrillas Have the Edge on Guided Missiles

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The batteries of gleaming American guided missiles in the northern city of Da Nang represent perhaps one of the most ludicrous sights and eerie paradoxes in this country waging a guerrilla war.

The silvery missiles symbolize to the world the most advanced achievements of American military might. But within Viet Nam they represent an admission that the United States has neither the political nor military means to win the guerrilla war—but only the means to make it more expensive for the Communists to win it.

Internationally, these non-nuclear missiles symbolize American military might in confrontation with the nuclear and missile might of Moscow and the massive ground-force strength of Peking.

But internally the confrontation is simply the guided missile vs. the guerrilla. Internally, the odds are still on the side of the guerrilla.

Moscow, Peking and Hanoi have consistently agreed that guerrilla wars as a tactic and "wars of liberation" as a strategy would be the warfare of the future. The Viet Nam struggle was to be a showcase of their achievements.

U. S. military officers in Viet Nam privately concede that this type of warfare—rather than confrontation with the Communist world—is their main concern in Viet Nam.

Whatever the international reason behind the failure of the major Communist capitals to react dramatically to the bombing of North Viet Nam, it is clear that in Viet Nam it is believed the Communists are winning the guerrilla war in the south and will continue to do so.

Even the first day after the air strikes Saigon took the news with nonchalant unconcern.

"We know the Russians and Peking will do nothing," said

one Vietnamese political observer.

"The Communists are already winning the guerrilla war—which is the one they want to win. And if Moscow, Peking or Hanoi did retaliate, it would undercut their arguments about a war of liberation—that this is a popular uprising of South Vietnamese in South Viet Nam against the South Vietnamese government and its American supporters.

The fact that the missiles were brought to Viet Nam is in itself an admission of failure on the part of American policymakers. After the first bombing of North Viet Nam over the Tonkin Gulf incident last August, Americans protected the South Vietnamese from retaliation by moving in more than a squadron of B-57 jet-fighters. However, on Nov. 1, the Viet Cong guerrillas virtually destroyed or damaged the whole squadron in a mortar attack on the Bien Hoa Airbase only 18 miles from Saigon.

When the dispatch of missiles to Viet Nam was announced, one American observer wisecracked, "I wonder how long it will be before the Viet Cong get the missiles." Even now, the Hawk missile site—and even the Saigon Airport—are considered vulnerable to Viet Cong attacks.

The guided missiles symbolize an attempt by American policymakers to super-conventionalize the guerrilla war, or more precisely to transform the character and dimension of the war on the terms America is best equipped to fight.

Simultaneously, the Viet Cong have been semi-conventionalizing the war on their own terms.

In recent months they have shifted from hit-and-run tactics by relatively small bands of guerrillas to mobile, but momentary frontlike warfare, committing to battle companies and battalions equipped with the best of American weaponry.

Likewise, they have turned from attacking fortified hamlets guarded by poorly trained local defenders to striking government district towns protected by regular army units.

They recently have stood and fought against the elite of government troops—the paratroopers and marines—and as in the case of Pleiku and Bien Hoa the Viet Cong have launched disastrous attacks against the biggest of military installations.

But one thing is still clear—the Viet Cong will not escalate the internal struggle to the extent of conventionalizing it at this time. Through systematic military offensives and political subversion they will increase the tempo, pace and dimension of their war.

Only when it is to their advantage—and not Washington's—will they attack with conventionalized army divisions. They will do that when they are ready to seize power—and then it is too late to stop them. The big question is when they will have the political alliances and military strength to do so.

Any assumption that bombing North Viet Nam would force Hanoi to downgrade the war in the south appears to be unsound. The action of Hanoi after the August bombing of North Vietnamese military installations was simply that the raids were a nuisance the

north would have to live with.

A historical analysis of Communist strategy suggests that even six years ago Hanoi was prepared to suffer reprisals for its support of the guerrilla movement in South Viet Nam. In 1958, a southern-born Communist cadre named Le Duan, now secretary general of the Communist party in Hanoi, wrote a report urging that Hanoi support not only anti-government political activity but also armed military guerrillas in the south. Hanoi considered the report for two years without making a decision—and the decision was made after President Ho Chi Minh visited Moscow and Peking for conferences.

The question was not whether to support the southern guerrillas—but whether Hanoi was prepared to accept the consequences of that commitment. Today, seven years later, the consequences of that decision is being watched by the world.

Perhaps in the final analysis, the bombing of North Viet Nam will be the test of American policymakers. For the biggest question in the minds of educated Vietnamese is whether last week's attacks are moves toward total victory or whether in the coming years, attacks on North Viet Nam would be the military means to strengthen the U. S. and South Vietnamese political bargaining position at the conference table.