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Nhân Dân

[Trích]

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There were basically two competing views about the war. One preached patience and caution, knowing that for all its firepower America could not sustain a long war and would eventually have to bargain and leave. This approach was advocated by China and endorsed by Ho himself, who was nothing if not patient after a lifetime of struggle. He was now a frail and sickly man of seventy-seven with only a year to live. He was spending more and more time at a clinic in China. He was there from mid-September to late December 1967, and after a brief visit to Hanoi returned to the clinic in early January to stay until late April 1968. He was out of the country for most of the planning and all the fighting of Tet. He had outlived not only his enemies in the party, but also much of his influence. He remained invaluable as Uncle Ho, the father of the nation. He was universally respected in the North, and revered by many in the South. The short poems attributed to him, read aloud on ceremonial occasions, were composed by committees for propaganda purposes, and they sounded like it, but they were also easy to remember and encapsulated the goals of the struggle. One went like this:

*Vì độc lập, vì tự do
Đánh cho Mỹ cút
Đánh cho Ngụy nhào*

For our independence and freedom
Let's sweep the Americans out
And make the Nguys fall down.

His influence was substantial but soft. *Soft*, in the sense that his legend and manner softened the party's message. Ho was viewed as a nationalist first, only secondarily as a Communist. He had fully embraced party principles, for sure, but he was also known for his humility and benevolence. The party, on the other hand, was hard. Persuasion was not a priority; its critics and enemies were imprisoned or killed. Ho knew there were many in the South who opposed Hanoi not so much on ideological grounds, but because of its methods. They had seen the VC execute or imprison leaders who did not fall in line. Ho consistently preached to the party that victory and reunification required winning the support of their southern cousins. He believed the effort might take many years. It would probably not come in his lifetime.

So for Ho, the point of war was to force the United States to negotiate. He took advantage of every opportunity to remind the Americans of his willingness to work with them. His

speech declaring Vietnam's freedom in 1945 had cribbed from the Declaration of Independence. He offered to begin negotiations for peace anytime, and even to invite the Americans over for tea, but at the same time he warned that he would prevail even if it took "twenty years."

Younger party leaders were in a bigger hurry. A faction headed by Le Duan advocated not just forcing the Americans to negotiate an end to the war, but also winning the war. It was determined to seize the initiative. The politburo argued out war plans for the coming year in the summer of 1967. The foreign minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, predicted some kind of major American offensive before the Americans' election day in November 1968—perhaps even an invasion of the North. Such a move might strengthen Johnson's hand enough to dictate a quick end to the war on his own terms. Le Duan argued, "We must elevate our own military activities to a new level, to a level that the United States cannot bear and that will force it to accept that it has failed militarily and that it has become isolated politically. If we can accomplish that, the United States will be forced to withdraw from Vietnam."

Turning up the heat was appealing in part because of the growing antiwar movement in the United States. The politburo did not expect LBJ to capitulate, but an escalation of the war could undermine his hopes for reelection. Militarily, the Americans were already a potent fighting force, and they knew that Westy, for all his talk about turning over war fighting to the ARVN, was continuing to build up his own command: he had requested hundreds of thousands of new soldiers in 1967, and had been granted an additional forty-seven thousand in July. The American threat was only going to grow, so waiting carried big risks. Acting first, delivering a decisive blow, might give Hanoi a critical advantage.

"As long as we have not won such a victory, we cannot achieve success at the conference table," Trinh said. "Victory" was defined as inflicting "heavy casualties" on American forces, the destruction of the ARVN, and inciting a general uprising throughout the South. The more realistic, like Ho, knew that all this was unlikely, but Le Duan believed complete success wasn't necessary. He wrote, "If for some reason the uprisings in the cities run into trouble and we are forced to pull our forces out, that will not matter. That will just be an opportunity for us to practice and to learn lessons from experience in order to prepare to try again at a later date. Comrade Fidel Castro's armed forces attacked the cities three times before they finally succeeded. If we enter the cities but then are forced to withdraw, that is nothing to be afraid of, because the entire rural countryside and the mountain jungles all belong to us—our position and our forces are strong in those areas."

Ho remained unenthusiastic. His opinion was echoed by the Chinese, who pointed to the protracted nature of Mao's struggle. They saw **the planned Tet campaign as a nod to Soviet tactics**, and, in effect, a sign that the party was leaning more toward Moscow than Beijing. **More significantly, the campaign was also opposed by Giap.** Le Duan had bested the general in a power struggle for party leadership in 1957, and the two men had been at odds for years. But this was a nation ruled by commissars, not by generals: the guerrilla general Kinh's sarcasm about the strategy was rooted in a truth Giap knew well. When the Party

Central Committee adopted Resolution 13 in January 1967, calling for a “decisive victory” in advance of reopening talks with the United States, it meant Le Duan was still in charge.

Giap’s handle on the military was slipping, too. The death of Hanoi’s commanding general of southern operations in the summer of 1967 elevated General Van Tien Dung, who had long served as Giap’s subordinate. While still nominally less important than Giap in the chain of command, **Dung began meeting directly with Le Duan to plan the Tet Offensive.** Ambition for it grew. Together they decided, in the words of Vietnam War historian Merle L. Pribbenow, to “consider risking everything on one roll of the dice.” It called for an all-out attack on cities in South Vietnam while the NVA’s main forces worked to pin down American and ARVN troops in rural bases. The rest would be accomplished by the people.

Giap began skipping planning meetings, and made it clear he believed the strategy would not work. When the final plan for the offensive, Resolution 14, was approved by the politburo in December, the old general was out of the country. He was in Moscow on the eve of Tet, and attended a performance of the ballet Swan Lake. Giap did not wish to be seen attending the theater at the same time his troops were launching their daring attacks, so he waited until the house lights were turned down before entering. **Ho abstained from voting on final approval for the plan,** although once it was clear it was going forward, he gave his endorsement before returning to China.

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