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INTRODUCTION

As in a time of peace, so in a time of war: the sea is not always an insurmountable barrier; it can just as easily bridge the gap between two widely separated points. In a time of peace, of course, this is easier to grasp. The oceans can often transport heavy commercial loads faster, more cheaply, and more effectively than overland routes. One has only to think of Fernand Braudel's history of *The Mediterranean* to remember how this sea generated commercial, cultural and historical exchanges between Europe and northern Africa, and further.¹ Denys Lombard has shown similar connections in his magisterial study of Java and his studies of maritime trade in Asia.² And more research is flowing in this direction.³ For geographers, the water nature of the latter region comes as no surprise. A quick look at the map makes it clear that the sea links Southeast Asia at the middle, the aquatic bridge between the peninsula extending from southern China to Malaya and the archipelago, reaching from Singapore to the Philippines.⁴

In recent years, excellent studies have focused on the importance of understanding the historical and economic importance of the sea-lanes linking the region before the installation of Western imperialism.⁵ Most of this work, however, is

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My thanks to the following for their helpful comments and assistance: Jay Veith, Ed Miller, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Merle Pribbenow, and the members of the International and Global History seminar at Harvard University.

4. Although the many dangerous reefs and islands in the sea have served as barriers to seaborne communications between the eastern and western side, forcing ships to use mainly north-south routes on either side of the sea.

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Figure 1: Vietnam and the South China Sea
concerned with the sea’s commercial role in peacetime. Little has been done on the connecting power of the ocean in a time of war in general,6 and even less on the maritime nature of 20th century ‘anti-colonial conflicts’ in particular. The Indonesian and Vietnamese wars against the Dutch and the French were after all all linked to water.7 Blocking a wider view is the fact that most studies of wars for 20th-century Southeast Asia remain locked into oppositions between ‘colonisers and colonised’, victims of fiercely nationalist histories that favour the diplomatic and political over the geographic and economic; and almost always focus on the land without thinking about how water might fit into the picture.

In this reflection, I would like to try to factor the sea into our understanding of the wars for Vietnam in the 20th century. My idea is to shift the view of thirty years of war against the French and the Americans from the land to the sea; from that thin Nation-State we now call Vietnam to the much larger body of water hugging it along the long eastern coastline, the South China Sea. In short, our analysis of the wars fought for Vietnam between 1945 and 1975 cannot be limited merely to the Nation-State nor to the land.8 Viewed from this wider perspective, one can see that Vietnam is part of a larger maritime world, located between East and Southeast Asia and linked by maritime routes and a long coastline running from southern China to the Gulf of Thailand. Rather than conceptualising wars from ‘on high’ in strictly diplomatic or political terms, I would like to argue that it is equally important to think about how the wars for Vietnam were linked ‘down below’ and across seemingly impermeable national borders. A geo-historical reflection on the maritime nature of the wars for Vietnam can help us do this. Geography, goods, sailors and ships will thus count as much as diplomacy, military strategy, and heads of state. The two go together.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

When the ‘Viet Minh’, the well-known Vietnamese nationalist coalition led by the Indochinese Communist Party, took power in August 1945, the economy was in a wreck, much of the northern peasant population was starving to death, the army was nascent, and the state was weak. The presence of some 100,000 Chinese nationalist troops in Vietnam north of the 16th parallel from late September 1945 until mid-1946


8. The South China Sea refers today to the large body of water in the Pacific Ocean, stretching from the Taiwan Straits in the northeast to merge with the Gulf of Thailand before ending in the southwest at the Straits of Malacca. The Philippines and Borneo constitute its eastern border; the northern islands of the Indonesian archipelago its southern frontier; while the eastern Vietnamese coast blends with southern China via Hainan to make up its western boundary.
only aggravated an already explosive situation. In the south, the British allowed a rapid French return and by late September hostilities between the French and the Viet Minh had already begun over the future leadership of Vietnam. The Vietnamese wanted national independence; the French sought to reassert their prewar colonial presence and state in mainland Southeast Asia, lost to the Japanese in March 1945. To that end, the French armed forces re-took Saigon and reoccupied provincial towns, routes and bridges, pushing the Viet Minh into the densely forested marshes and canals of southern Vietnam. Hardly a year later, in December 1946, Franco-Vietnamese negotiations degenerated into full-scale war in all of Vietnam. In February 1947, pushed out of Hanoi, the central government chose to operate from the highlands of Thai Nguyen and Tuyen Quang provinces near the Chinese border. Full-scale war had broken out in Indochina over the control of Vietnam. It would take thirty years of fighting to determine the outcome.

Under communist direction, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) operated from the hills of northern Vietnam until the end of the war in 1954. The country was divided into administrative and military inter-zones (lien khu (LK)), falling within the three major geographical divisions of Vietnam: the North (Bac Bo), the Centre (Trung Bo) and the South (Nam Bo). Each one looked out over the South China Sea and shared an overland border with Laos and/or Cambodia. In Nam Bo, the Viet Minh operated mainly in the coastal and marshy areas running from Ca Mau to Ha Tien (LK 9) to Thu Dau Mot and Bien Hoa provinces (LK 7). The situation was better in Trung Bo, where French land forces never reoccupied vast regions of Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and Ha Tinh provinces in upper central Vietnam (LK 4) and Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh provinces in lower central Vietnam (LK 5). However, the French navy and air force held on to the major ports of Nha Trang, Hoi An, and Hue, but not to Tuy Hoa, Tam Quan, Thanh Hoa, Vinh (Cua Hoi) or other, smaller openings to the South China Sea. Geographically, battles and strategy during the Franco-Vietnamese war included all of Vietnam, and even western Indochina (Laos and Cambodia). Before 1954, there was no entirely independent Vietnamese state to serve as a rear area for fighting elsewhere in Vietnam. And until the Chinese communist victory and occupation of Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and Hainan Island in 1949-50, all of Vietnam was isolated from large-scale external military and financial aid.

As for communications, because of Vietnam’s thin, S-like shape on the eastern edge of the Indochinese peninsula and French domination of the major roads until the early 1950s, the Vietnamese and Chinese coastal junk trade became one of the most important ways by which the DRV conducted its commercial exchanges both inside and along the country’s coastline. French air superiority meant that much of the Viet Minh’s trade movements had to go under the cover of the night.

9. The Potsdam agreements in mid-1945 divided Indochina at the 16th parallel, giving the Chinese nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek responsibility for disarming the Japanese in the north and the British the same duties south of that parallel.
10. Despite some desperate and impressive efforts, the DRV had no real air force during the war against the French. Lịch Sử Không Quan Nhân Dan Việt Nam (1955-1977) (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Ban Quân Đội Nhân Dan [hereafter NXBQDND], 1993).
sampans supplied rice-deficit regions in lower Trung Bo and LK7 with paddy exported from Viet Minh-controlled parts of the Trans-Bassac in Nam Bo. Central Vietnam exported locally made arms up and down the coast. During the northeast monsoon season between November and April, traffic sailed from the north to the south, while the southern monsoon lasting from May to October moved vessels towards the north. In the Gulf of Tonkin and the Gulf of Thailand, exchanges went in both directions thanks to the increasing numbers of small motorised junks and favourable winds. The profoundly aquatic nature of the southern and northern deltas, if not the entire coastline, made sampans a vital part of the Viet Minh’s internal exchanges coming from the South China Sea.

**The South China Sea in a War of Decolonisation**

The South China Sea was a link for the Vietnamese in a time of war, but not always an easy one. During that brief moment after the Japanese defeat in August 1945 and the outbreak of full-scale war in all of Vietnam in late 1946, the DRV did its best to restart trade via the South China Sea. Northerners initiated exchanges with southern Chinese traders, while southerners turned to Southeast Asian markets, in particular Thailand. Those in central Vietnam looked to both Southeast and East Asia. Southerners also attempted to tap into the Chinese junk trade in the South China Sea; but this would turn out to be extremely difficult for all the war against the French.

Until December 1946, the DRV’s opposition to the French mirrored what would happen against the Americans two decades later. The DRV continued to exist territorially above the 16th parallel, while a war raged south of that line against a foreign power opposed to the reality of that northern state’s claim to Vietnam. From September 1945, the DRV in the north used junks and sampans to send hundreds of young men of the *Nam Tien* (Go South) units to fight the French in Nam Bo. Located strategically in lower Trung Bo, zone 5 played a particularly important role in channelling arms, gold and medical supplies to the south. Ancient coastal navigation lent itself well to clandestine arms infiltration. Sampans, small junks, and fishermen helped shuttle these goods to the south. In late 1946, one of the first coastal missions to Nam Bo delivered 500 rifles, 1000 grenades, eight Thompson guns, and two heavy machine guns among other things. These coastal links remained vital after the outbreak of war in all of Vietnam, especially since LK 4 and 5 tended to remain unoccupied. In early 1947, one of the DRV’s best known spies, Pham Ngoc Thao, organised a secret water route to supply Nam Bo with supplies, medicines, information, and above all 20 kg of gold.

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and French Indochinese piastres, vital to Nam Bo’s capacity to buy arms and supplies in French-controlled and foreign markets.14

Unlike the war against the US, Vietnamese opposed to the French could also use the South China Sea to reach clandestine arms markets deep in Southeast Asia. This was particularly true for southerners. In 1946 or 1947, for example, the ICP’s southern territorial committee (Xu uy Nam Bo) sent Duong Quang Dong (Nam Dong) to Kuala Lumpur to receive several tons of arms donated by the Malayan Communist Party. Dong successfully delivered these arms to Nam Bo via the sea, marking one of the first long-distance missions in DRV maritime logistics.15 Southern and central Vietnamese exchanges with Thailand were, until around 1951, of even greater importance.16

The Viet Minh located along the coast of Trung Bo (LK 4 and 5) relied most heavily on the South China Sea and Chinese traders in order to conduct their coastal exchanges and to reach markets in Beihai (Pakhoi), Macao, Hong Kong, Guangzhou (Canton) and the island of Hainan. Already in mid-1946, the DRV had approved formation of a semi-official Import-Export company called the Viet Thang—the ‘Vietnamese Victory Company’. It administered LK 4 and especially LK 5’s external trade with Hong Kong, Macao, the island of Hainan, and, to a lesser degree, Beihai. LK 4 worked also through similar, though smaller, trading companies in Vinh, Thanh Hoa, Diem Dien, and Quat Lam to trade with Haiphong and especially Beihai via Cat Ba (see below). Central Vietnamese traders had little choice but to rely on maritime Guangdong as their major overseas trading market and perhaps the Philippines located straight to the east.

The Viet Thang had first been created by the short-lived Tran Trong Kim government installed by the Japanese in mid-1945. Following the defeat of the latter, in 1946 the DRV restarted this company with five million French Indochinese piastres. It served as a crucial relay in moving food supplies, arms and soldiers from the north to the south, and vice-versa.17 At the outset, this trading house was fittingly placed in the ancient Vietnamese trading town of Hoi An (Faifoo). Until the outbreak of war in northern Vietnam in late 1946, it had subsidiaries in Hanoi, Hue, Da Nang and Vinh. With the return of the French in force to these ports in early 1947, the centre of the Viet Thang was transferred to Tam Quan in Binh Dinh province, with at least four branches operating in Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh and Tuy Hoa, each with smaller agencies scattered in the countryside for distribution and buying purposes. Because the French Expeditionary Forces focused on the two deltas of Vietnam, these central

15. Nguyen Ngoc, Co mot con Duong mon tren Bien Dong (Hanoi: NXB Ha Noi, no date [c. 1990s]), 27-8.
zones could operate more freely from direct French ground force interference, other than short-lived, if very destructive, aero-naval attacks. In any case, it appears that the Viet Thang was never shut down. As of 1950, it still maintained a total capital of ten million Bank of Indochina piastres.\textsuperscript{18}

The Viet Thang was not an official part of the Vietnamese Navy. Indeed, a Vietnamese navy did not yet exist (see below). While the DRV government did its best to direct this company’s actions, the evidence available suggests that the state was relying on private Vietnamese and Chinese traders to conduct its wartime commerce. If authorities bought $2/3$ of the Viet Thang’s merchandise at the official price, they allowed local, private traders to sell the remaining third of their imports at the higher, unfixed market price.\textsuperscript{19} However, Viet Thang traders were no doubt happy to have local state authorities allocate them the lion’s share of all trade in the Viet Minh zones, given long-established and competitive Chinese operations in Vietnam. In any case, in 1949 a French naval intelligence officer claimed that the Viet Thang had ‘established a monopoly’ on the Viet Minh’s foreign trade in Trung Bo.\textsuperscript{20}

Based in Tam Quan, the Viet Thang’s two main foreign destinations in the South China Sea were Hong Kong and Macao. Through their local agents and connections reaching into the interior, the Viet Thang located, purchased, and transported sought after exportable products to the coast. With little hard currency for purchasing foreign imports, the Viet Thang did its best to amass valuable exports such as opium, cinnamon, sugar, shark fins, silk, tin, areca, paper and various delicacies appreciated in Chinese markets.\textsuperscript{21} Cinnamon, opium, paper and tin dominated its exports. In September 1949, the Viet Minh at Quang Ngai used a 70-ton junk to export 40 tons of tin.\textsuperscript{22} In August 1950, the French navy intercepted a junk carrying four tons of cinnamon and another loaded with 20 tons of this spice as well as three tons of tin.\textsuperscript{23} Arms, medicines, pharmaceutical products and some petroleum products were the Viet Thang’s major imports from southern China.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{19} 'Bilan économique et financier Viet Minh en mai 1950'.

\textsuperscript{20} FMOE, EM, 2B, no. 69/EM2, ‘BR no. 24 : Bilan économique et financier Viet Minh au 1 juillet 1950’, Saigon, 9 July 1950, 14, d. [red, unmarked], c. UUE-29, SHM.


\textsuperscript{23} FMOE, EM, 2B, no. 91/EM2, ‘BR no. 25: Trafic maritime rebelle’, Saigon, 8 November 1950, 9, d. FMOE, EM2, 1950, c. UUE-29, SHM.

Southern Chinese ports offered central Vietnamese potential access to arms, equipment, and goods coming from the interior of China, Asia and the West in the wake of the Second World War. Second, these ports were important relays in international smuggling operations that targeted the ‘emerging markets’ offered by escalating war in China and anti-colonial versions in Indochina and Indonesia. Third, in the wake of the Second World War, large amounts of Japanese and Allied surplus arms, ammunition and military equipment escaped destruction or confiscation to feed an impressive Asia-wide arms market channelled through these ports. Besides its inland Chinese sources, Macao and Hong Kong were also important transit points in the smuggling of large amounts of Allied arms from the Philippines towards the shores of mainland Southeast Asia. Fourth, the free port status of Macao and Hong Kong in the late 1940s made them particularly attractive destinations for acquiring all sorts of Western medicines, acids, petroleum products, radio equipment, and replacement parts. Fifth, the Viet Minh opened secret bank accounts in these commercial sites and conducted an important part of its piastre trafficking thanks to Chinese banking connections there. Sixth, these ports were often the home of many of the ethnic Chinese traders dealing with the Viet Minh in Vietnam.

In Macao, the Viet Minh could enter into contact with a variety of traffickers; especially those specialised in selling left-over Allied arms. A French naval study of this traffic concluded that the availability of war materiel from China on the Macao black-market was at its height from late 1946 to the end of 1947. A French naval study of this traffic concluded that the availability of war materiel from China on the Macao black-market was at its height from late 1946 to the end of 1947.25 Arms from the Philippines probably filled the gap thereafter. In January 1948, French naval intelligence reported that Viet Minh agents had been sent to Macao to take possession of a large quantity of mercury and arms coming from ‘the Pacific Islands’ worth a total of five million Hong Kong dollars. A Chinese crew was to deliver it to the region of Vinh.26 The French navy claimed that motorised junks left Macao twice a month to deliver American arms and equipment and Chinese and Western medicines to Quang Ngai and Quang Nam provinces, suggesting the LK 5 was more closely linked to Hong Kong and Macao than to Beihai. In return, they took stocks of opium, cinnamon, sugar, textiles, silk and Bangka tin to southern China.27

27. ‘BR no. 20: Mois de janvier et février 1950, Traffic maritime rebelle’, 15; MN, DNEO, Secteur de surveillance Maritime en Annam, ‘Fiche de renseignements’, no. 246/OP, Tourane, 24 June 1952; and MN, DNEO, SSMA, ‘Lagune de Tam Ky’, no. 125/OP, Tourane, 25 April 1952, the latter two in d. Surmar Annam, c. UUB-28, SHM. Chinese merchants in LK 5 owned a large shipload of tin extracted from the mines of Bangka in Indonesia, apparently stranded in or sunk off the coasts of LK 5 during the Second World War.
This low-level South China Sea semi-private war trade was not large enough to make a strategic difference in the war against the French; however, it did help the Viet Minh hang on in difficult circumstances, especially in central Vietnam. In April 1949, LK 4’s Minh Duc trading house relied on a Chinese ship owner from Beihai to deliver 17 tons of war materiel and supplies.28 In Thanh Hoa, the Lien Hung company combined Chinese traders and the Viet Minh police to move goods to and from Beihai.29 In 1948, Viet Minh documents revealed that Quat Lam had been receiving monthly quantities of 2000 bales of cotton, one ton of mercury, 100 kg of potassium chloride and small quantities of mortars and bazookas from Beihai.30 Even in the worst of times, a Viet Minh customs agent in Quat Lam still declared that ‘a dozen’ junks continued to arrive every month.31 In 1950, the French claimed that despite their efforts to stop this clandestine trade, the Viet Thang in particular continued, ‘thanks to their extreme prudence’, to maintain ‘fairly regular’ trading relations with the exterior.32 Whatever its weaknesses (and there were many), the Viet Thang is an important historical example of how the South China Sea began to play itself out in a mainland 20th-century war for Vietnam.

CHINESE MARITIME NETWORKS AND THE WAR FOR VIETNAM

While the Vietnamese were most certainly players in the DRV’s junk movements running up and down the eastern side of the Indochinese peninsula, the evidence suggests that bigger Chinese junk traders played the dominant role in arranging and transporting LK 4 and 5’s goods to and from southern China.33 Indeed, during the war of decolonisation against the French, the Vietnamese had to tap into age-old Chinese trading networks in order to administer their trade via the South China Sea. Chinese business operations based in Beihai were particularly engaged in trade with upper Trung Bo. In control of several local munitions and arms factories in the Beihai area, ‘twenty or so important Chinese traders, with perfect knowledge of Tonkin and northern Annam’, dominated ‘almost all of the traffic’ with LK 4. Chinese merchants in Beihai traded mainly with the Viet Minh ports of Thanh Hoa, Vinh, Diem Dien, Thai Binh, and Phat Diem, all small port-towns linked profoundly to the Vietnamese

30. MN, DNEO, EM, no. 48/EM/2, ‘Avis de renseignement no. 27’, undated but clearly early 1948, d. DNEO, EM2, c. UUD-8, SHM.
33. Easier access to outboards motors, and hence speed, may be one important reason, but not the only one.
interior by a myriad of waterways. Viet Minh customs agents and the Beihai Chinese merchants monitored as meticulously as possible their shipments across the Gulf of Tonkin by radio. Departure and arrival lists were carefully compared, undeclared goods were seized, and receipts were mandatory. The DRV paid in Indochinese piastres, gold, cinnamon, tin and/or opium. Ho Chi Minh banknotes and dong were worthless in this trading world.34

Both the Indonesians and Vietnamese needed these Chinese business networks precisely because of their regional nature and long-distance maritime connections. To ensure their economic cooperation, the Viet Thang accorded the Chinese ‘many privileges’, according to one of the company’s former employees.35 In early 1948, the Chinese trader, Yui Chinh Chuy (Cam Phuc) informed LK III officials that he had formed a new Import-Company, Phuc Thinh, in Diem Dien to transport DRV goods.36 DRV documents reveal that Chinese traffickers, such as Yeung Tin Wan and especially Woong Tac Mao, were deeply involved in running arms and explosives to the Viet Minh in upper Trung Bo from Beihai.37 The former president of the Chinese congregation of Cat Ba used several of his 20 to 40 ton junks to smuggle goods from Beihai to upper central Vietnam.38 In Bong Son, Chinese traders in April 1946 had acquired twenty tons of tin for export further north, but were held up by the DRV government seeking to take over this trade.39

The Hainanese form an interesting Chinese link in the South China Seas. To this day, the Hainanese community of fishermen living on the island of Dao Bach Long Vi in the Gulf of Tonkin between Haiphong and Hainan speak Vietnamese and continue to trade with central Vietnam. (The island was once disputed between China and French Indochina, but has since been recognised by China to be under Vietnamese sovereignty.) The Hainanese living or active in central Vietnam bought forest products, precious stones, cinnamon, swallow nests, tiger pelts, elephant tusks from as far inland as Laos in order to introduce them to the international market via the South China Sea. Hainanese junk traders had long been particularly involved in the cinnamon

34. FMEO, EM/2B, no. 151/EM2, ‘BR no. 13: Trafic de contrebande rebelle’, 20 December 1948, 2, d. FMEO/EM/2/1948, c. UUE18, SHM.
38. SEHAN, Bretagne, Haiphong, 3 September 1948, source: [x, deleted by the author, CEG], value: B/2, in HCFIC, SDECE, no. 2235/BRT, 21 November 1947, d. 1948, c. 10H2952, SHAT.
39. Viet Nam Dan Chu Cong Hoa, Tin Tuc, ‘Dien tin so 251: Nguoi gui (Thanh, Tourane) nguoi nhan (Tong Sang, Hanoi)’ [Telegram no. 251 from Thanh in Tourane to Tong Sang in Hanoi], dated 30 April 1946; ‘Dien Tin so. 686 nguoi gui Huynh Trinh Trac (Bong Son) [cho] Nguoi nhan Tong Duc’, dated 21 April 1946; and ‘Dien Tien 50.111’, dated 9 April 1946, all in c. 12, Gouvernement de fait, CAOM and decrypted by the French in c. 10H528, SHAT.
trade with central Vietnam.\(^{40}\) This continued to be the case in a time of war. The Hainanese trader, ‘Cao Vinh Sanh’, was said to run trading missions for Trung Bo authorities; he was also a well-known cinnamon trader at Tam Ky.\(^{41}\) There were also large Hainanese communities residing in Rach Gia and Kampot provinces off the Gulf of Thailand. Hainanese merchants there played an important role in running the southern resistance’s lucrative pepper trade with Bangkok. A recent Vietnamese study reveals that between 1950 and 1953 the Viet Minh generated around 33 million piastres from its pepper trade via the Chinese in southern Indochina.\(^{42}\)

As for Hainan, repeated interceptions, captured documents and radio decrypting proved that a ‘regular’ trade existed with the Viet Minh in Trung Bo. In March 1948, for example, a large junk transporting materials and Chinese medicines to the Viet Minh from Hainan was captured.\(^{43}\) Following Pibul Songkram’s return to power in Thailand in 1948, Vietnamese communists working there hoped to shift their Southeast Asian trading routes from Thailand to Hainan in order to continue to supply the southern resistance which was increasingly isolated from external supply sources. However, in 1948, one of the highest ranking Vietnamese communists in the ICP, Cao Hong Lanh, reported to his colleagues in Thailand that establishing a junk route with Hong Kong and Hainan would be difficult given that the GMD controlled the western half of Hainan facing Vietnam.\(^{44}\)

Of course, trade could have improved when Chinese communists invaded the island in April 1950. Indeed, the DRV hoped that Hainan would provide a new maritime way of supplying central and especially southern Vietnam, which would remain cut off from direct, overland aid from the CCP in the north.\(^{45}\) In August of that year, a Chinese merchant captured by the French explained that he had participated in this traffic between Hainan and central Vietnam because of the ‘important profits’ to be made. He had transported 6.5 tons of red sugar, 3.5 tons of cinnamon, and 6.5 tons of swallow nests among other things for the Viet Minh of Quang Ngai. The DRV wanted in exchange pharmaceutical products and textiles.\(^{46}\) The mission was intercepted.

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40. My thanks to Claudine Salmon for sharing this information, based on her research in Hainan. For the earlier periods, see A. Bonhomme, ‘La cannelle royale’, Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue 4 (1916), 422.
42. Quan Tinh Nguyen Viet Nam o Campuchia, thoi ky 1945-1954 (Ca Mau: Nha Xuat Ban Mui Ca Mau, 1998), 148.
44. Intercepted document, dated 10 May 1948 in c. 10H5637, SHAT, and letter from Cao Hong Lanh, dated August 1948, d. Activités chinoises, c. 110, Conseiller Politique, CAOM.
Running such large loads against the French navy was obviously extremely risky, especially when the CCP victory in 1949 led the French to tighten their naval surveillance of the Gulf of Tonkin and the western waters of the South China Sea. On 3 November 1950, intercepted southern Viet Minh radio communications explained that the time was not yet ripe for sending large numbers of junks to Hainan. French surveillance was also sufficiently effective to frustrate the Vietnamese hope of supplying central Vietnam by air from Hainan. In August 1950, LK 5 reported that an airbase had been prepared to receive supplies at a secret site in Quang Ngai. LK 4 had even established a supply office in Hainan. Knowledge of this led the French to step up their surveillance of such locations.

The Paracel Islands were potentially important. The DRV hoped that Chinese communist control of the Paracels could aid in the supplying of southern Vietnam and orders were issued to this effect. However, the evidence suggests that supplying from these scattered islands never really amounted to much. Chinese merchants working for Vietnamese traders or authorities made some use of them. Vietnamese use of the Paracels would increase during the war against the Americans, when the DRV created a small navy and a much more effective naval blockade would push the Vietnamese away from the coast and further into the South China Sea (see below).

Ethnic Chinese networks in Vietnamese ports were also internal openings to the South China Sea, even if the Viet Minh did not administer them directly. In his general economic plan for Saigon-Cholon in 1947, Kha Van Can, the head of the Nam Bo resistance economy at the time, explained that Viet Minh agents were heretofore authorised ‘to sell [Viet Minh] products directly to Chinese traders’. These traders, he explained, would then transport Viet Minh goods to ‘agents abroad’. A recent history of the DRV’s arms industry during this period confirms that Chinese traders in southern Vietnam helped the Viet Minh import much needed goods from the French zones and even as far away as Hong Kong.

49. CCFAEO, EM/2B, SI, no. 3958/FAEO/2S, Saigon, dated 1 September 1950, source: DY, val. A/1, dated 18 August 1950, d. 58, c. 10H547, SHAT on the air link and SDECE, FTCV, EM/2B, no. 3781/FTCVP/2S, 11 December 1950, d. 64, c. 10H549, SHAT. This apparently failed, according to an Austrian communist working for the Viet Minh in central Vietnam and involved in receiving such planes: Pierre Sergent, Un étrange Monsieur Frey (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 301.
51. Of course, it is possible that islands in the Paracels, such as Lincoln or others, were used as stepping stones in the arms trade between southern China/Hainan and eastern Vietnam. SDECE, no. 6531/XYZ/MB, dated 17 August 1951, d. P01, UU-SUP02, SHM.
52. ‘Kinh Te Khang Chien Nam Bo, Khu Dak Biet Dia Phuong Saigon-Cholon’, undated, but clearly 1947, d. 1947, c. 10H3991, SHAT.
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DRV’S EARLY SOUTH CHINA SEA TRADE

Just how important were these commercial exchanges to the DRV? Without access to trading records, it is impossible to say with certainty. According to a captured DRV document, for 1949, 27 transportation junks moving from LK 4 to 5 made their trip successfully for every 24 junks lost to the French. Out of a total of 213,068 kg of merchandise sent by the maritime route, 100,429 kg or around 100 tons of material and food supplies arrived safely. Of course, it would be absurd to extrapolate from this one document for all the Vietnamese external trade or even the coastal trade. Moreover, 100 tons for one year is not a particularly large quantity. The cargos remained limited in size and vulnerable to French surveillance (Trung Bo’s junks averaged in size between one and five tons). We have no figures on the extent of the DRV’s long-distance commerce across the South China Seas. Indeed, one of the major maritime differences between the French and American periods was that until 1950 the DRV had no access to modern and powerful arms coming from China and the Soviet Union. Early DRV commerce in the South China Sea was linked to questions of mere survival, not supplying major offensives. Though important, arms were not the major imports. Rice and medicine were. Short-distance coastal routes dominated, not long-distance ones. And Chinese networks counted as much as Vietnamese ones; indeed, the two overlapped.

Although the state may have tried to control operations like the Viet Thang, the DRV never had a navy or even a merchant marine capable of supplying the war effort directly. That is not to say that the DRV did not try. Emboldened by the Chinese communist victory and concomitant Chinese military assistance, the DRV General Staff under Vo Nguyen Giap outlined plans with Chinese advisers to administer a maritime supply route from Hainan to Trung Bo in order to outfit one entire division and an anti-aircraft battalion by early 1951. This plan probably explains the increase in French naval interceptions from Hainan at this time (see above). Sino-Vietnamese plans were even being made to supply southern Trung Bo and Nam Bo from the sea, though they were apparently never implemented. In any case, the CCP victory had opened the possibility of running a new and effective maritime supply route to middle and southern Vietnam. On 5 September 1949, the General Staff created a ‘Naval Studies Section’ to begin work on creating a Navy, training officers in coastal and astronomical navigation, and developing maritime supply operations between south-eastern China.

56. Admiral Auboyneau told a military committee investigating the battle of Dien Bien Phu that the Viet Minh had been largely unsuccessful in importing contraband from China to Vietnam during the war: ‘Rapport de la Commission d’enquête militaire sur la bataille de Dien Bien Phu’, d. C1, c. 1Q47, SHAT. However, his statement is contradicted by many reports (too numerous to cite here) from French naval intelligence. My thanks to Stein Tonnesson for sharing this document with me.
and eastern Vietnam. A special naval unit, 'Company 71', was sent to south-eastern China in 1950-51 to undergo intensive training. However, Chinese knowledge of modern naval techniques was spotty at best. Other than the taking of Hainan in April 1950 (thanks to local Chinese fishermen), the Chinese provided little modern naval training to the Vietnamese. In fact, the Vietnamese sent to south-eastern China learned more about land combat than naval warfare.

Nevertheless, back in Vietnam, Company 71 would begin efforts to open water routes between southern China and Hainan to the Bay of Ha Long and central Vietnam; but again the results were very limited. While limited in size, the French navy was not a push-over. The main Chinese supply lines going to Vietnam remained overland ones. The DRV's maritime supply movements were largely private affairs, not part of the armed forces. As late as 1954, a Soviet ship apparently involved in repatriating southern troops to the north docked in the Ong Doc river estuary in Ca Mau. It delivered six tons of guns and ammunition pre-packaged in crates for secret stockpiling for later use. In late 1954, a Soviet vessel had probably made the first major arms delivery to southern Vietnam via the South China Sea in post-colonial Vietnam. It also marked the appearance of a Soviet naval presence in Southeast Asia in the 20th century.

The absence of a navy would change once the DRV was able to create its state north of the 17th parallel and war with the Americans became ever more likely. It would also see a fall in the DRV's reliance on Chinese traders as the risks became just too great to justify trying to run the American blockade and trust and secrecy became absolutely vital for transporting Soviet and Chinese arms southwards.

**THE CCP VICTORY AND THE SHIFT IN LOGISTICS IN AN EMERGING COLD WAR CONTEXT**

What is important to recall at this point is that the emerging water routes never existed independently of the overland ones, or vice versa. This was true since the beginning of the war in 1945. Conceptually and historically, the coastal routes linking northern and southern Vietnam against the French are significant. Both French naval intelligence and recent Vietnamese communist publications confirm that a North-South supply route running between zones 4 and 5 to zones 6, 7 and 9 in the extreme south had

57. For unknown reasons, Company 71 was unable to undergo more advanced training at the new Chinese naval academy in Shanghai.

58. I am relying here on the memoir of a former member of the DRV General Staff, who crossed over to the French: 'Mémoire écrit par [x, name deleted by CEG], ex-[x], adjoint au chef du [office deleted by CEG] de l'Etat-Major Viet Minh', and the attached 'Rapport du lieutenant [x, name deleted by CEG] sur sa mission en Baie de Halong', c. 10H2353, SHAT. This defector had been a high ranking member of the DRV General Staff and had worked directly with Chinese advisers. Even the birth of the 'Naval Studies Section' in upland Viet Bac reflected the obvious weakness of the DRV's nascent navy.

been secretly called the Ho Chi Minh liaison road (Duong lien lac Ho Chi Minh). Besides arms and supplies, this route also moved important cadres back and forth, ensured vital communications, and strengthened the leadership of the northern-based Central Committee over the southern resistance. The supply route feeding the resistance up and down the Vietnamese coast existed thus long before the overland route of the same name (see below).

The Chinese communist victory of 1949 and the advent of the Cold War in Southeast Asia in 1950 increased the importance of this North-South coastal link. The CCP decision to aid the DRV war effort, under ICP direction, provided northern Vietnam with a key rearguard. Concretely, it linked Bac Bo to the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi by overland routes, especially after the combined Sino-Vietnamese defeat of the French Expeditionary Corps at Cao Bang in 1950. Although initial Vietnamese military plans in 1949-50 aimed to liberate the Sino-Vietnamese border all the way to the Gulf of Tonkin, the French blocked it and the Chinese Red Army never tried to run its major supply operations to the Vietnamese army via the South China Sea from Hainan and Guangdong province. The French Navy was preparing for such an eventuality; the Americans would have probably intervened; and a smaller and less modern Chinese navy was still more preoccupied with taking Hainan and preparing for the invasion of Taiwan. The decisive battles in the defeat of the French occurred along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier and in the mountainous region of Dien Bien Phu from late 1953 to May 1954, not at Haiphong, Vinh Yen or Moncay. Significantly however, by 1951, an overland trail had been pushed southwards from China, along the western side of the Tonkin Delta, to supply Chinese aid as far as LK 4 and 5. Without this interior route coming from southern China via Bac Bo’s western side, central Vietnam would never have been able to supply its impressive main force divisions (which the General Staff had initially hoped to outfit via the Hainan maritime route). These central divisions appeared only in this region from 1951.

However, no division ever existed in Nam Bo during the war against the French. While General Nguyen Binh, the southern commander, had done remarkably well in creating a series of main force battalions, with supplies coming from Thailand, down

60. FMEO, EM/2B, no. 28/EM2, ‘BR no. 20: Trafic maritime rebelle’, 23 March 1950, 15, d. [unmarked, red folder], c. 29, UUE, SHM and FTCVNP, EM/2B, no. 3578/TFSAP/2, ‘Piste Ho Chi Minh’, Nha Trang, signed by Vesinet, dated 11 November 1949, d. 51, c. 10H544, SHAT; Lic Su Bo Doi Thong Tin Lien Lac Quan khu 7–Mien Dong Nam Bo (1945-1955) (Hanoi: NXBQDND, 1995), 49; and Bo Quoc Phong, 50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam (Bien Nien Su Kien) (Hanoi: NXBQDND, 1995), 52. According to Vo Nguyen Giap, a land route linked LK 4 to the liberated areas of Quang Nam. This first occurred in mid-1948, doubled by a maritime connection: Vo Nguyen Giap, Chien Dau trong Vong Vay (Hanoi: NXBQDND-NXB Thanh Nien, 1995), 369.
61. 50 Nam Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam, 52.
63. At least until Kim Il-Sung’s invasion of South Korea in June 1950 derailed Beijing’s plans to launch a naval landing on Taiwan.
the South China Sea coast from LK IV and V, and from French-controlled markets like Saigon-Cholon, he could not obtain the heavy armament and large amounts of food and medicines needed to support division-level units. Indeed, if Vietnamese communists in the north were thrilled to receive thousands of tons of military and food aid after the border port of Cao Bang was opened, southerners found themselves suddenly in a perilous position as the CCP victory in the north led the US to increase its commitment to Thailand and the French-backed Associated-States of Indochina, the direct competitors to the ICP's revolutionary states. Not only did southerners lose their overland and overseas access to Thailand as Pibul moved towards the US, but they also faced tightened French naval surveillance, with American support. An important effect of this was that southern strategists were forced to turn to the inside in order to hook up with the overland trail dropping down from China into LK 4-5 and to double their coastal Ho Chi Minh route with an overland one in the event that they lost access to the South China Sea.

General Nguyen Binh reveals this in his study of the creation of an overland 'Indochinese Trail'. His report to the Ministry of Defence in 1951 left no doubt that the creation of this new overland 'route crossing all of Indochina' from LK 4 via southern Laos and north eastern Cambodia would allow the Vietnamese to supply Nam Bo 'once the Ho Chi Minh liaison route presently doubling route no. 1 is blocked'. The famous Ho Chi Minh overland trail crossing all of former French Indochina—allegedly created in 1959—clearly got its start, at least conceptually, a decade earlier, at the Cold War conjuncture of 1949-50. It was in response to the Chinese communist victory and the real threat of increased US intervention in Indochina by sea and overland from Thailand. Nguyen Binh was very much aware of what US-led forces had done in Korea since June 1950. Looking at the situation from deep inside Indochina (north-eastern Cambodia to be exact), he predicted that if the war widened and the US entered it against the Chinese and Vietnamese, then the weight of the conflict would shift rapidly to southern Vietnam. French and possibly US forces would then occupy southern Vietnam and Cambodia and Indochina would be cut into two halves.

We must find the means to deal with the situation in which the French enemies increase their armed forces in order to consolidate their hold over the southern zone. We must take defensive measures in preparation for the outbreak of the 3rd world war and when Indochina will become the principal front in Southeast Asia. French forces could isolate the northern zone from the southern one.

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It was in this larger regional and international reading of the war that Nguyen Binh insisted that the ‘Indochinese Trail’ had to be created. Nguyen Binh’s worst fears would come true of course a decade later, as the Americans entered the war and made every effort to isolate southern Vietnam from its northern half by sea and land. In this longer *durée* and wider geographical analysis of the wars for Vietnam, it is not surprising that the famous overland Ho Chi Minh trail began first as a supplement to the maritime routes in the South China Sea, and was then pushed inwards as an Indochinese overland trail following the Chinese communist victory in the north. Land and sea routes are linked in a time of war, just as in a time of peace. To see only one—and not the other—is to miss the picture, and the point. The overland Ho Chi Minh Trail did not appear in 1959 *ex nihilo*. 
The Limits of the Overland Routes to Nam Bo

The French colonial withdrawal from northern Vietnam in 1954-55 and southern Vietnam in 1956 did not bring peace to the region. Five years after the Geneva Conference of 1954 had effectively divided Vietnam into two states with a line of demarcation and a demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel, tensions rose between the communist-led DRV north of that line and the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam to the south. The president of the south, Ngo Dinh Diem, was a fiercely anti-communist nationalist. Backed by the Americans, this Catholic Vietnamese had already begun to crack down on any opposition to his power, especially from remaining communist networks in Nam Bo.\(^{68}\) The DRV was communist and had been anything but happy about Diem’s cancellation of the national elections which the Geneva Conference had scheduled to take place in 1956. This made it impossible for Hanoi to proceed towards national reunification through non-military means and allowed the US to replace the French militarily. Backed by the initially reluctant communist giants of China and the USSR, Hanoi would approve the decision of its southern branch to abandon political struggle in favour of armed action against Diem. By 1959 armed struggle had resumed below the 17th parallel under the direction of the southern bureau of the Vietnam’s Worker’s Party, the ‘Territorial Committee of Nam Bo’ (Xu Uy Nam Bo).\(^{69}\) It relied on former Viet Minh troops from the ‘anti-French period’, returning forces which had been regrouped to North Vietnam after Geneva, cadres sent from the north, and worked in collaboration with a newly formed ‘National Liberation Front’ (NLF) under increasingly direct communist control.\(^{70}\) Later regular troops from the People’s Army would be sent south to fight.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that this brewing civil war for Vietnam was no longer occurring within a colonial context; but rather it was increasingly subsumed by a larger and more dangerous Cold War, which had made

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68. Similar crackdowns had begun in the DRV in the late 1950s against dissidents calling for greater freedom of expression.

69. The ICP’s ‘Territorial Committee of Nam Bo’ first appeared in 1945. In 1951, the ‘Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam’ (Bureau of the Central Committee for the South, or COSVN for the Americans) replaced it and was in charge of all of southern Indochina, including Cambodia. In the autumn of 1954, however, COSVN was dissolved and replaced, again, by the ‘Territorial Committee of Nam Bo’ under Le Duan’s direction: *Quan Khu 9*, 235-6, and *Quan Khu 8: Ba Muoi Nam Khang Chien* (Hanoi: NXBQDND, 1998), 288. COSVN replaced the Territorial Committee in January 1961 under Nguyen Van Linh’s leadership: *Quan Khu 8*, 402.

70. New communist publications and my own research suggest that the southern movement represented by the NLF was never as independent as many authors have argued. However, any discussion of this complex question cannot be divorced from the pre-1954 period and the difficulties communists encountered in their attempts to lead and control the southern resistance. For reasons of political legitimacy, the Vietnamese party would like us to believe today that they were always in control of the ‘struggle’ in the south. While they most certainly intended to do so, that does not mean that they were successful at the time. See my “‘La guerre par d’autres moyens’: Réflexions sur la guerre du Viet Minh dans le Sud-Vietnam de 1945 à 1951” [War by Other Means: Reflections on the Viet Minh’s War in Southern Vietnam between 1945 and 1951], in *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 206 (2002), 29-57.
itself felt in the region since 1949-50. By the early 1960s, in the heat of such intense Cold War battles as the Berlin and Cuban Missile crises, the Kennedy administration increased the American military commitment to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in order to stop perceived Sino-Soviet communist expansion into Southeast Asia. Despite their differences, Nikita Khrushchev’s Soviet Union and Mao Zedong’s China provided massive quantities of supplies and military aid to the DRV in her battle against the RVN and the American forces coming to her aid. The Chinese, we now know, sent thousands of engineering troops to work for the DRV and 25 years of Chinese military aid was crucial to the DRV’s success in reunifying Vietnam in 1975.

For the DRV, the resumption of the war for southern Vietnam meant supplying it from the north. Just as China had played a crucial role in helping the Viet Minh dislodge the French in 1954, now Bac Bo would have to do the same for the south (with military aid from the USSR and China). In May 1959, picking up in many ways where Nguyen Binh had left off in 1951, the DRV began work on creating a functional overland logistics route to supply southern Vietnam via both sides of the Annamese cordillera (Truong Son for the Vietnamese) and by sea. Such routes would ship medicines, weapons, supplies, cadres, and troops to the south. To this end, on 5 May 1959, the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) and its General Staff ordered Senior Lt Colonel Vo Bam to form the ‘Special Military Operations Corps’ (Doan cong tac quan su dac biet), which was shortly renamed Doan 559. It was led by Vo Bam. Under the party’s direction, 500 people worked in Group 559 at the outset. In August 1959, 559’s 301st Battalion (soon renamed Group 70) delivered Western-made weapons to Quan Khu 5 (‘Military Region’ or MR) for the first time. By the end of 1959, around 50 tons of weapons had been delivered there. In order to push routes to the western side of the Truong Son into lower Laos, on 12 September 1959, the Ministry of Defence and the Central Committee’s ‘Military Commission’ (Quan Uy Trung Uong) created Group 959. It became the DRV’s specialist team for operations in Laos and worked to ensure supply routes to Nam Bo through Laos.

In July 1959, as part of this search for logistics links to the south, the DRV ordered a simultaneous investigation of possible maritime routes. Battalion 603 began studies of the Gianh River in Quang Binh province, going undercover as a group of fishermen.


72. The ICP was renamed the Vietnamese Workers Party in 1951.

73. During the war against the French, Vo Bam had run the South China Sea to buy arms for LK 5.


75. Lich Su Bo Doi Truong Son, 30-1.
By late 1959, Battalion 603 had created a unit of 12 five- to seven-ton vessels for sea operations.76 However, none of this was easy. In April 1960, the entire program was dissolved and maritime operations were transferred to the Office of the Navy (Cục Hải Quan).77

Similar difficulties confronted the creation of overland routes. They could not be magically completed and extended to lower Nam Bo in a matter of months or even years. In the early 1960s, groups 559 and 959 had very little success in creating operational trails via the western side of the Annamese Cordillera and Laos. For one, RVN and Lao defences were there. Physical geography and disease alone made transportation overland arduous, dangerous, costly and slow.78 International agreements, not least of all the Geneva Accords of 1954 and another set on Laos in 1962, made it illegal, theoretically, to violate the territories of the existing states. French Indochina no longer existed as a legal and diplomatic entity. The communists were now operating in a divided Vietnam battlefield; expansion into Laos, Cambodia or even Vietnam below the 17th parallel could be interpreted as a violation of national sovereignty and could provoke international and military reactions.

While the DRV never really respected rules banning operations in western Indochina, especially in lower Laos,79 in the early 1960s they had to conduct their supplying of the south with the utmost secrecy and on a limited scale for fear of provoking direct US intervention. In April 1961, the Party’s Military Commission renewed its efforts to supply southern Vietnam by launching what it called ‘Operation or Task B’ (công tac B), ‘B’ referring to ‘Nam Bo’. General Hoang Van Thai ran this program. He relied on 559 to reach Nam Bo by both sides of the Annamese Cordillera. This was probably linked to the Politburo’s approval in February 1961 of a second five-year military plan for 1961-65, calling for the creation in southern Vietnam of armed forces totalling 10-15 ‘strong regiments’.80 However, the RVN and the Lao government combined efforts to maintain control of their territory bordering the DRV (especially MR 4). Their efforts were particularly effective in 1962 and 1963. As a result, 559’s overland routes only scored very limited successes in the early 1960s. Again, the trails remained very primitive and irregular; the terrain was inhospitable; and enemy surveillance and ripostes a reality.81 From November 1960 to April 1961, 559’s Group 70 delivered only 30 tons of weapons to areas near the DMZ. For all of 1961, 559 only

76. 35 Nam Duong Ho Chi Minh tren Bien va Thanh Lap Lu Doan 125 Hai Quan (Hanoi: NXBQDND, 1996), Luu Hanh Noi Bo, 17, and Lich Su Bo Doi Truong Son, 29-30.
77. Lich Su Bo Doi Truong Son, 36.
78. See Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tien Bien (Hanoi, NXBQDND, 1995), 10, for a nice example.
80. As discussed in Lich Su Cong Binh 559, 45.
81. Lich Su Cong Binh 559, 27-8, 46-7, 60-3, admitting: ‘Viec van chuyen vo cung vat va’/’Transporting was incredibly difficult’ (28).
The DRV's War Against the US and the Republic of Vietnam

Viewed from this wider perspective, the serious difficulties in extending the Truong Son routes forced the DRV to turn to the sea. The diplomatic dangers of running through Laos reinforced this (though attempts to move through lower Laos had already begun). Moreover, in the early 1960s, US naval surveillance of the western part of the South China Sea was still relatively limited (the threat of war over Taiwan had been real between 1954 and 1958, while the Berlin and Cuban crises deflected US strategic and naval attention elsewhere) and the Republic of Vietnam's navy was experiencing serious growing pains. It was possible to run large loads of modern arms without being detected. Although early attempts to send supplies by sea to the south had begun in July 1959, it was not until the Ministry of Defence formed Group or Doan 759 (backdated for 'July 1959') on 23 October 1961 that Vietnamese communist efforts to supply the south with modern Chinese and Soviet weapons via the western side of the South China Sea began. The Vietnamese Politburo and the Central Committee's Military Commission made this decision in response to the arrival a few months earlier of several southern junks and their skippers pleading for weapons to fight. In fact, in August 1961, the communist leadership of COSVN had authorised this overture to the north. Ngo Dinh Diem's effective crackdown on the remaining communist networks in southern Vietnam left them vulnerable to annihilation, if they could not fight back with modern and heavy arms capable of opposing those provided to the Republic of Vietnam by the US. Located far from 559's limited outlets into southern Trung Bo, southerners, especially those in MR 9 in Ca Mau, Ba Ria and Tra Vinh, had no choice

82. Lich Su Cong Binh 559, 53, 51-2, and Lich Su Bo Dai Truong Son, 72. Group 70 was part of 559. Hundreds of cadres were moved to southern Vietnam via 559's operations in the early 1960s. The DRV imported thousands of superior Chinese pack bicycles to increase 70's supply effectiveness over the rough round land terrain.

83. The absence of an operational overland and maritime routes to Nam Bo in 1960 was such that the DRV decided to use a Soviet plane (and pilot?) to transport high-level cadres from MR 5 and Nam Bo in Hanoi to southern Laos, from where they could quickly return to their bases in southern Vietnam to take on Ngo Dinh Diem's devastating attacks. Truong Son (Pham Te), Cua lanh trinh nam ngan ngay dem (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Van Nghe Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1992), 54-9. Unfortunately, I do not know the exact date of their return to the south, but they did cable Hanoi their safe arrival in 1960.

84. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 7-14.
but to look to the South China Sea in order to obtain arms from the north.\textsuperscript{85} Thailand was no longer a possibility. However, the men who had run arms to Nam Bo from Southeast Asia against the French, Duong Quang Dong and Bong Van Dia, ran these first, desperate southern maritime missions to the north on COSVN orders. This first secret maritime mission in mid-1961 was called 555.\textsuperscript{86} One can see in the life work of these two men the geo-historical shift in the supplying of the south from a horizontal East-West link to Thailand and Southeast Asia to a North-South connection running to southern China (and on to the East European Communist bloc).

In response to these desperate southern overtures, Hanoi understood that it had to create a secret naval logistics unit to start supplying the south in arms. No longer could the ethnic Chinese networks be expected or trusted to run modern arms worth millions of US dollars against vastly superior American naval power and surveillance. Moreover, the international context was such that the operation had to be an official DRV undertaking of absolute secrecy.\textsuperscript{87} 759 received this mission, placed under the joint control of the Politburo and its Military Commission led by General Vo Nguyen Giap. 759's task was to create a functional and secret 'strategic maritime route' running along the Vietnamese coast between Haiphong and the southern tip of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{88} General Tran Van Tra, Deputy Head of the General Staff at the time, was in charge. The 759 group was outfitted with wooden- and steel-hulled vessels, the latter fabricated secretly in Hanoi and Haiphong or imported from socialist friends. Its craft left from Do Son (secretly called K-20) near Haiphong, making their way through the Gulf of Tonkin, down the coast or hop-scotching across to Hainan and the small islands of the Paracels before darting towards the coast in search of inlets and reception points, linked to the interior of Vietnam by a myriad of rivers and canals. Waiting sampans or pack animals would quickly move the weapons to the inside of Vietnam and on to waiting troops and guerrillas. The landings usually occurred under the cover of night.\textsuperscript{89} The majority of 759's captains and sailors were southerners, many of whom had been regrouped to North Vietnam after the Geneva Accords.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{85.} While Bong Van Dia successfully navigated the first junk to northern Vietnam in August 1961 in search of arms, the second one, led by Ho Van In, lost its course during a storm and ended up in Macao: Quan khu 9, 321-2.

\textsuperscript{86.} Ban Chap Hanh Dang Bo Tinh Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Duong Ho Chi Minh tren Bien Ba-Ria-Vung Tau (Hanoi: NXB Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 1993), 7, 24-5. It is possible that Duong Quang Dong and Bong Van Dia are the same person.

\textsuperscript{87.} In 1961, Le Duan, Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Pham Van Dong and Pham Hung were directly involved in beginning secret seaborne operations to Nam Bo. As Le Duan underlined to the Central Committee's Military Commission, this logistics operation 'had to maintain total secrecy; if not then all would be lost': Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 33.

\textsuperscript{88.} Ibid., 32-3. Duong Quang Dong's operation (Doan 555) was incorporated into 759.

\textsuperscript{89.} Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{90.} Ibid., 37.
Figure 3: The Ho Chi Minh Land and Seaborne Trails

Broken black lines in the sea indicate the maritime Ho Chi Minh Network
Tied lines indicate a railway line
Grey lines indicate the Republic of Vietnam’s routes
The communist political and military leadership was surprised by the initial success of this southern-inspired maritime operation. In October and November 1962, the 759’s first four trips to Ca Mau delivered 111 tons of arms to zone 9. From October 1962 to late 1963, a total of 23 missions delivered 1318 tons of modern weapons and ammunition to southern Vietnam, mainly the provinces of Ca Mau, Ben Tre, Ba Ria, and Tra Vinh. From there, transport group Doan 962 and others distributed the war material internally. In 1964, 49 vessels delivered 2971 tons of arms and 113 cadres to southern Vietnam, while 408 tons of arms were delivered in the first two months of 1965. These vessels could often make their trips in eight days to the tip of Ca Mau, at relatively little cost and labour. Apparently none of these early missions was detected much less intercepted. These weapons would outfit and arm the units fighting for Ap Bac against the Republic of Vietnam troops and their US advisers. When the first 759 vessel, appropriately named Phuong Dong I (Orient I), left Haiphong for Ca Mau in 1962, there to see it off were Pham Hung, Nguyen Chi Thanh and Tran Van Tra. Its skipper was a southern veteran, Bong Van Dia, who had made several arms runs between Thailand and Nam Bo during the French war and had first befriended Le Duan, general secretary of the VWP, serving hard time at the French colonial penitentiary on Poulo Condor island in the early 1940s. Bong Van Dia had the total confidence of ranking COSVN, VWP and Army leaders. Phuong Dong II left shortly thereafter. Both of these Vietnamese junks followed the coastal maritime route, before successfully discharging weapon loads in the reception site of Vam Lung in Ca Mau in particular. The 759 vessels were in close radio contact, not only with their destination points, but also with the General Staff and even the head of the Central Committee’s Military Commission, General Vo Nguyen Giap. This too was a significant shift in Vietnamese naval history. And it also pointed up the degree to which ‘guerrilla warfare’ in Vietnamese hands was becoming a highly technical operation.

The South China Sea route seems to have had a much better success rate than the overland 559 operations. And it reached well beyond lower central Vietnam. Indeed, the success of these early supplying missions encouraged the Military Commission and the Politburo, lifting their faith in the effectiveness of the maritime route and its strategic value. While a debate occurred as to the diplomatic and military dangers this incurred in light of the Geneva agreements, the south’s military needs were simply too great: the southern communist networks were threatened with destruction and the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail was nowhere near being able to supply Nam Bo

91. Lu Doan 125, 21.
92. Ibid., 22, and Nguyen Ba, Nguoi Thang Bien (truyen ky) (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Tre, 2002), 111, citing Bong Van Dia’s memoirs.
93. Nguyen Ngoc, Co mot con Duong mon, 111.
94. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 83-4, and Quan khu 8, 459-66.
95. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 51, 59, and the biography of Bong Van Dia in Nguyen Ba, Nguoi Thang Bien, 71-93. The code-named ‘Phuong Dong/Orient’ was selected in honour of the recent flight of the Soviet Vostok (Orient) spacecraft, which carried Yuri Gagarin into space. It was a nice reflection, too, of the Cold War background of the maritime route in the minds of DRV strategists.
96. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 46.
via the inside in the early 1960s. In 1963, the DRV went a step further by creating a new operational office to run southern logistics, called ‘Section B’ (Bo Phan B). Under ultimate Politburo and Military Commission control, its functional operations were turned over to the General Staffs, the General Political Directorate, and the General Directorate of Rear Services. Section B worked directly now with 759. The Vietnamese Central Committee decided to step up vessel production, and shift to making them out of steel so that they could better handle the rough weather and pounding waves of the South China Sea. Meanwhile, southerners developed additional receiving stations in lower central and southern Vietnam.

Given the international and national contexts at this conjuncture, the DRV leadership did not waste their time. By late 1963, the Central Committee’ Military Commission had placed Group 759 and the maritime route under the direction of an emerging naval command (itself a response to this emphasis on maritime supplying of the south). To mark the transition, in January 1964, Group 759 was officially renamed Brigade 125 by a decree of the Ministry of Defence. It became an official unit of the DRV’s official Naval Command. This southern-inspired initiative had accelerated attempts already underway by the DRV to develop a real Navy. Brigade 125 was equipped with twenty steel- and wooden-hulled vessels and its main mission was to deliver arms to Nam Bo, extreme southern Trung Bo and MR 5 below the DMZ. Emboldened by its successes, the DRV hoped to make larger vessels of 60 to 100 tons with steel hulls. In January 1964, the ship making industry in Haiphong produced five ships of 50 tons. And an unnamed ‘friendly nation’ provided fifteen more boats, each of which could carry between 100 and 200 tons of arms.

This was not without results: The sea-borne route was operational. According to Vietnamese sources, between January 1964 and February 1965, Brigade 125 conducted successfully 88 missions to the south (including MR 5), delivering around 4000 tons of arms. It also transported some troops and high-level political, military and technical cadres. According to a recent Vietnamese military study,

97. In DRV military parlance, ‘B’ referred to ‘Nam Bo’. Therefore this was most probably the code word for ‘Southern Logistics Section’ of the Vietnamese People’s Army. This was apparently a separate, seaborne operation, not to be confused with the overland ‘Cong Tac B’ discussed above.
98. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 72-3.
99. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 33, 73-4. The Vietnamese navy had started as a study section during the war against the French (see above). It took off in the form of the ‘Office of the Coastal Defence’ (Cuc Phong Thu Bo Bien), formed on 7 May 1955. It was then transformed into the ‘Office of the Navy’ (Cuc Hai Quan) on 24 January 1959. But it only became a real armed force on 3 January 1964 with the formation of the Naval Command, just before the 759 was transformed into the Naval Brigade 125: Tu Dien Bach Khoa, 326. In 1956, the DRV received four minesweepers from China; in 1959 they received 24 Swatow-class patrol boats from China; and in 1961 they received 12 Soviet torpedo-boats and four Soviet submarine-chasers. Lich Su Hai Quan Viet Nam (Hanoi: NXBQDND, 1985), and a source which must remain anonymous.
100. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 83-5.
101. Lu Doan 125, 24. Secret communications equipment and codes were also sent. As in the earlier period, this maritime route allowed the VWP’s Central Committee to follow closely changes in the south and send agents with instructions.
until February 1965, we had used three wooden vessels and 17 steel-hulled vessels to make 88 voyages, transporting 5,000 tons of supplies, including many types of weapons, to the battlefield. Of all these voyages, only four encountered problems, when the vessels went aground or hit underwater rocks, and in general all personnel and supplies arrived safely.102

On comparing different sources, I think it is more likely that this number of 4-5000 tons refers to the total amount of arms and supplies transported between 1962 and early 1965.103 What is certain, thanks to new Vietnamese studies, is that these arms definitely helped arm combat units in the south.104 I would argue that the ‘Ho Chi Minh maritime trail’ was probably more important than the overland ones up to and including 1965.

Other coastal areas below the 17th parallel north of Nam Bo were soon interested in this new supply route. MR 5, in particular, asked Hanoi for arms via the seaborne trail. Vo Nguyen Giap felt that the South China Sea route should be reserved for Nam Bo, since it was the only route capable of reaching that far south. 559 overland operations, he felt, could funnel arms more easily to MR 5.105 Nevertheless, the evolution of the war was such that speed was crucial and time was increasingly lacking. Giap eventually approved a supplying of MR 5. Reception points were opened at Vung Ro (Phu Yen), Lo Giao, and Sa Huynh to receive Brigade 125 shipments.106 In June 1964, just before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the DRV sent vessel 401 into Binh Dinh to try to help MR 5 outfit and arm its forces. In October 1964, the wooden junk 401 finally delivered its weapons at Lo Giao.107 Vung Ro became a particularly important landing site for MR 5. Its relative deep-water port allowed for easier and faster discharging of 100-ton ships. Brigade 125 would send its first iron-hulled vessel (no. 41) to Vung Ro in November 1964, successfully delivering 44 tons of arms and munitions. It would make two more successful trips shortly thereafter. Thanks in part to these weapons deliveries (though only amounting to around 171 tons), MR 5 was able to increase its military activities in the winter and spring of 1964-65.108

102. Tran Danh Ba Muoi Nam, 2 vols (Hanoi: NXBQDND, 1995), II, 201. There is obviously a difference of 1000 tons between the tonnages given in this source and the previous one. This might be a differences between arms and supplies.

103. A former member of 125, Nguyen Long An, who was active in 1964 in these arms deliveries, provides the following tonnages: 1962: 810 tons of arms; 1963: 1318 tons; 1964: 2971 tons and 113 ‘guests’; January-February 1965: 408 tons and 25 guests. This gives a total of 5507 tons of arms and supplies.

104. Duong Ho Chi Minh tren Bien Ba Ria-Vung Tau, 36-75. Seventy tons of AK47’s, B40’s and B41’s went into Lac An on 1 February 1965, ibid., 58-9.

105. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 126 and Tong Ket cuoc Khang Chien chong My Cuu Nuoc, 223-4, note.

106. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 127.

107. Ibid., 133, and Lu Doan 125, 28.

108. Lu Doan 125, 29-30; Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 134; and Tong Ket cuoc Khang Chien chong My Cuu Nuoc, 223-4, note. Speed explains why the maritime route was tactically and strategically so important to MR5.
Figure 4: Parallel Routes: The Overland and Seaborne Trails
Reinforcing the importance of the sea route at this conjuncture was, again, the difficulty 559 was encountering in opening a supply line west of the Annamese Cordillera via lower Laos. At stake was control of the strategic frontier zone between routes 8 and 12. The main objectives of the DRV’s Campaign 128 between December 1963 and February 1964 was to control eastern parts of central and southern Laos, to support the Pathet Lao, and most importantly, in my view, to ensure that 559 could push a vital supply route from MR 4 to Nam Bo via lower Laos. The success of this battle provided 559 with 700 km of a safe border with central and southern Laos, key for the 559’s logistics operations west of the Annamese Cordillera. The Central Committee’s Military Commission was determined to push a route into Nam Bo via the western side of this range. In October 1964, as war with the US seemed ever more likely, the Military Commission implemented ‘Plan S’ (Ke Hoach S). From October 1964 to March 1965, 559 was instructed to transport 705 tons of arms and rice down the western side of the Truong Son. While 559’s results were still limited, this renewed attention to the overland operations in early 1964 came as the sea-borne supply line came under great pressure that same year. Strategically, economically, militarily and even diplomatically, all these routes were linked.

THE VUNG RO INCIDENT AND ITS IMPACT

The largely unchecked maritime supplying of southern Vietnam from the north could not continue forever without drawing the attention of increasing US surveillance and patrolling of the South China Sea. This became painfully clear on 15 February 1965, when Vessel no. 143 of Brigade 125 docked with 63 tons of arms at Vung Ro in MR 5. After having begun to unload its cargo, it was detected by US air reconnaissance, attacked, and sunk in the bay. RVN troops finally took the area after fierce fire fights on the 19th. The 130-foot vessel was transporting 100 tons of Soviet- and Chinese-made weapons, ammunition, explosives and medical supplies. For Vice Admiral Paul Blackburn, commander of the US Seventh Fleet, the Vung Ro incident confirmed that ‘sea infiltration into [the] RVN is now proved’. A former member of 125 told American intelligence that the ships were delivering regularly 90 tons of arms, including AK-47s, ammunition, B40s and B41s, explosives and mines. These increased supply missions came in the midst of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 1964 and the

109. Lich Su Cong Binh 559, 69; Lich Su Bo Doi Truong Son, 76-7; and Tu Dien Bach Khoa, 97-8.
111. Lu Doan 125, 30.
accompanying Rolling Thunder and Barrel Roll air campaigns. From this point, at war with both the US and the RVN, the DRV had no choice but to step up its supply missions by land and sea to the south.

Increasingly committed to defending the RVN for a variety of strategic reasons, the US would now double its efforts to block the DRV’s logistics routes. For these reasons, 1965 clearly marked a turning point in the maritime nature of the war for Vietnam. The arrival of the US 7th fleet to the western part of the South China Sea after the Vung Ro incident made this clear to all involved, from the Politburo members straight down to the brave sailors running 125’s missions across the sea and their counterparts charged with pushing the Ho Chi Minh overland trail further southwards. In March 1965, the 7th fleet landed marines at Da Nang. The need to intercept sea infiltration became a top priority for the Americans and the 7th Fleet became an integral part of the war for Vietnam, key to shutting down the DRV’s use of the South China Sea from the 17th parallel southwards. A naval blockade was instituted. It was coupled with bombing campaigns designed to interdict the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail now moving steadily, but with great difficulty, towards southern Vietnam’s western side via southern Laos and north eastern Cambodia. A very sophisticated and effective naval surveillance system was installed by the Americans to create a cordon sanitaire around all of southern Vietnam’s maritime borders from the 17th parallel to Rach Gia and Phu Quoc. The famous Operation Market Time (Task Force 115) began in 1965 and lasted until 1970-71. This naval force conducted inshore and offshore patrols against DRV seaborne infiltration. Market Time worked in conjunction with Game Warden, in charge of monitoring the rivers, in order to deny all forms of water to enemy supply operations. The US helped strengthen the RVN’s navy by improving surveillance, increasing junk fleets, and introducing faster boats. The US Navy sent special missions north of the 17th parallel to gather intelligence and to ensure a more effective blockade of the maritime route running eastward to the Paracel islands. Operating from Subic Bay in the Philippines and various points in Vietnam, the US introduced air surveillance of most of the South China Sea east and southeast of Vietnam. Added to this were Airborne Electronic Countermeasures (ECM), the use of PC-Orions, Neptunes, listening devices (decrypting), and, of course, radar. In short, the South China Sea was being covered in new and more modern ways than ever before in its history. Significantly, this had begun in a time of war and the DRV was as much a part of this mapping of the seas as the Americans who were trying to shut them down. The French navy had only dreamed of such surveillance of the Vietnamese coast. For just southern Vietnam, the US had 150 surveillance vessels at its disposal (among the most sophisticated of the time), whereas the French had only had 50 for all of Vietnam (few of which were cutting edge). American air surveillance of the western part of the South China Sea averaged 1500 hours a month, whereas the French had never exceeded 500 hours.

117. Estival, La marine française, 267.
DRV strategists understood very well that the game had changed by 1965 following the Vung Ro incident. As the US stepped up its surveillance networks, Brigade 125 scored its last successes in getting through. Vessel 42, for example, delivered 60 tons of arms to Ca Mau successfully on 24 October 1965. Vessels 68 and 69 successfully followed, with similar quantities of arms. However, US intervention in Vietnam meant that the maritime route of Section B would be harder than ever to run at the very moment that Nam Bo would need modern and heavy weapons from China and the Soviet Union. The nascent DRV navy was about to enter into its most difficult period of the war for Vietnam.

1965-1970: BLOCKING THE DRV FROM THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Naval Brigade 125 now faced a serious American naval blockade of southern Vietnam from the 17th parallel all the way to the Cambodian border. One important effect of this American blockade was that the DRV had to find new trails and new solutions in order to keep its sea borne route open to the south. New efforts were made to gather intelligence on enemy surveillance. Investigations into using international sea-lanes were launched (or rather they were dusted off and intensified). The DRV even opened special training courses on astronomical navigating for long-distance shipping far from the coast. In October 1965, one of the first astronomical navigating vessels, no. 69, went wide into the South China Sea in an attempt to skirt US destruction before running the blockade to the Vietnamese coast. The idea was to use the safety of international waters to avoid US detection and/or destruction. However, getting lost in the middle of the sea was also a real fear. Modern navigational techniques and training were thus indispensable.

Knowing and using the islands and the Guangdong border of the South China Sea increased. Hainan became an increasingly important infiltration staging-point and refuge for failed missions. The use of small islands in the Paracels, Poulo Condor, Phu Quoc, and other nearby islands were essential as stopover points. Once locked on to identified islands, skippers could plot their coordinates and initiate their runs toward predetermined reception points.

118. For a clear confirmation, see Nguyen Ngoc, Duong mon tren Bien Dong, 110-21.
119. Lu Doan 125, 32.
120. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 163, and Lu Doan 125, 31.
121. No longer navigating by the sight of the Vietnamese coast.
122. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 105-11.
123. This information comes from a former crew member of Brigade 125. It was provided to the author on the condition of anonymity by the person who interviewed him after his escape from Vietnam across the South China Sea in the late 1970s. The increased use of the southern Chinese coast and Hainan is confirmed by Nguyen Ngoc, Tren Bien Dong, 182-5, 213.
124. Vessels 42 and 649 among others ran missions wide into the South China Sea. Visual location of Natuna was apparently important for setting the nautical course to MR 9. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 303-7, 343, 351-2. I am not convinced that 125 missions actually stopped over often on the Paracel Islands; but rather used them for hiding from the US Navy, for emergency landings, and above all for orientation. One reason is that the cargos 125 vessels were carrying were just too valuable to risk losing to hidden rocks in the shallow waters of this part of the South China Sea, which were not yet reported on DRV naval maps.
on the Vietnamese coast. This was no easy task, for US radar, air and naval surveillance, and decrypting were no technical pushovers. In 1972, a DRV mission went wide into the South China Sea, hugging the waters of the Philippines and Malaysia before making a run for Ca Mau via the Gulf of Thailand. US surveillance followed its every move. Its ships were waiting for it when it hit RVN waters off Phu Quoc.

Indeed, US surveillance picked up easily on vessel 69. The latter would escape attack by setting course in direction of Manila, with the option of heading towards Hong Kong. At one point, vessel 69 took refuge on a Chinese island. It was ultimately forced to return to northern Vietnam, marking one of the first in a long line of failed missions (noted at the time as ‘O’ probably for ‘khong’, or ‘failure’). The captain of the vessel reported to the Military Commission that the US was patrolling effectively not only near the coast, but also wide into the South China Sea. In April 1966, the 69 left again for the high seas and finally succeeded in getting through to Ca Mau. But again it was soon detected by US surveillance and would encounter serious fire during its withdrawal from the coast. This exit would make it even harder to get through to Ca Mau in the future.

Judging from recent internal studies of the Vietnamese People’s Army, the American naval blockade of the Vietnamese coast was effective between 1966 and 1969, if not until 1973. During this period, Brigade 125 found it almost impossible to get through to southern Vietnam. Many of its vessels were blocked, damaged, or sunk. Others, faced with imminent capture, were intentionally destroyed by the crew in order to avoid losing their cargos to the enemy or revealing the nature of 125’s operations. Many of the sailors sent on these missions never came home. Between 1965 and 1968, of a total of 28 seaborne missions, only seven were successful (and that is putting it optimistically). All seven boats had to fight their way back out of Vietnam to reach the South China Sea. Brigade 125 supplied only 410 tons of arms for the total period. The problem, of course, was that this effective naval blockading of the south occurred precisely when southern forces were in greatest need of modern heavy weapons and ammunition. In early 1968, for example, the DRV General Staff hoped to supply the Tet offensive via seaborne missions (as well as by land of course). However, of the five vessels sent, four were lost (each with as much as 100 tons of arms). In 1969, another four vessels were all denied access to southern Vietnam. In 1970, Brigade 125 organised fifteen missions, but only five succeeded.

125. Each vessel had a radio which kept it in touch with the reception point in Nam Bo and Hanoi. I do not know if US intelligence was able to intercept DRV radio communications. I do know that the Vietnamese were perfectly aware of the dangers and encrypted extremely carefully (when they could).
126. Nguyen Ngoc, Co mot con Duong Bien, 201-5.
127. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 177, 184-5, 192, 197, 207, 217.
128. Lu Doan 125, 19, 32-6.
129. Nguyen Ngoc, Co mot con Duong Mon Bien, 130-5, 146-8.
130. Lu Doan 125, 35-6.
131. Lu Doan 125, 33-4, and Duong Mon tren Bien, 238. Also see http://www.mrfa.org/tf115a.htm.
132. Lu Doan 125, 36.
The situation must have been simply critical between 1970 and early 1973, when the US could attack the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia and southern Laos and keep maritime infiltration at a low on the eastern side, all the while bombing Bac Bo and Trung Bo above the 17th parallel. According to Vietnamese statistics, between October 1971 and April 1972, hardly any of the twenty vessels dispatched by Brigade 125 penetrated the blockade successfully. Vietnamese military sources only say that between 1971 and 1972 ‘almost all’ of 125’s missions were forced to return to the north.\(^{133}\) The mining of Haiphong in 1972 must have contributed to this dismal performance. This may help to explain why it was so important for the DRV to complete in December 1972 a secret oil pipeline running from the Chinese border to the southern province of Thu Dau Mot.\(^{134}\)

Desperate, southerners took matters into their own hands. In 1971, MR 9 in the far south established its own maritime supply operation, named S.950 (renamed Doan 371 in 1972). In response to these southern demands, the deputy head of the General Staff, Nguyen Don, approved a new seaborne logistics plan. A series of steel vessels was procured and outfitted to go wide into the South China Sea in order to supply zone 9 from either the eastern side of Vietnam’s southern tip or from the western side in the Gulf of Thailand. Other ships supplied MR 9 via trips leaving from coordinates calculated off the island of Poulo Condor. Between 1971 and 1972, S.950/Doan 371 organised 31 trips and were able to infiltrate 520 tons of arms and munitions into MR 9, allegedly with the help of Brigade 125.\(^{135}\)

In this context, one can better understand why other supply routes had to fill the gap. The overland Ho Chi Minh trails had to compensate more than ever for the closure of the maritime route. It was essential to extend the land route as far southwards as possible in order to keep the southern effort alive militarily, economically, and even medically. Revealingly, Brigade 125 was now charged with supplying the overland Ho Chi Minh trail from its upper feeder in zone 4, in DRV territory just north of the DMZ.\(^{136}\)

\(^{133}\) Lu Doan 125, 37-8.

\(^{134}\) Su That ve nhung Lan Xuat Quan cua Trung Quoc va Quan He Viet-Trung (Da Nang: NXB Da Nang, 1996), 63-4; Tu Dien Bach Khoa, 993; and Qiang Zhai, China & the Vietnam Wars, 203. The Vietnamese report that this pipeline was officially completed 31 December 1972, running over 2000 km in length.

\(^{135}\) Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 366-70, makes no mention of Brigade 125, whereas Lu Doan 125, 39, does. S.950 brought Le Duc Anh to Bac Bo in 1973 in return for arms.

\(^{136}\) Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 295-6.
SHIFTING THE SEA ROUTE TO THE WESTERN SIDE: THE PORT OF SIHANOUKVILLE (1965-1970)

The closing of the South China Sea maritime route to the DRV in the late 1960s could have spelled disaster for the DRV and NLF’s forces in southern Vietnam, especially for MR 9 located far from the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail’s feeders. In an extraordinarily fortunate coincidence, however, another maritime route linking northern Vietnam to southern Vietnam via the South China Sea emerged: access to the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville (Kompong Som). This had occurred in 1965, when American attempts to deny sanctuaries in Cambodia to their Vietnamese opponents led to a breakdown in relations with Cambodian Prince Sihanouk. In May 1965 (shortly after the Vung Ro incident), the mercurial prince severed diplomatic relations with the US. They would not be restored until 1969. Convinced that the communists would win in Vietnam and determined to indebted the DRV to him instead of the nascent Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk allowed the DRV to run supply missions to western Nam Bo via the port of Sihanoukville and across eastern Cambodia. Thanks to this shift in foreign policy, a new seaborne trail to Nam Bo was opened for the DRV at the very moment that the one feeding southern Vietnam from the eastern face had been closed and when route 559 was still very far from supplying all of Nam Bo from the western side of the Annamese Cordillera. Whatever the reasons, the DRV owes an enormous strategic debt to prince Sihanouk for leaning the DRV’s way between mid-1965 and 1969.137

The port of Sihanoukville was an excellent logistics point. It was a modern deep-water port that had been constructed between 1955 and 1960 in order to reduce Cambodia’s reliance on the Mekong flowing through lower Vietnam. The French had financed the building of the port, while the US helped build Route no. 4 linking it to Phnom Penh. Since the war against the French, Vietnamese communists had always understood the importance of access to Cambodia to run the war in southern Vietnam. Indeed, the VWP’s southern committee had been located in Phnom Penh between 1956 and 1959.138 Its intelligence services were therefore well placed to follow the construction of Sihanoukville and develop a wide range of contacts in Cambodia.

The DRV and NLF access to Cambodia between late 1965 and early 1970 was a godsend. Vietnamese communist leaders would refer to Cambodia as the ‘neighbouring or adjacent rearguard’, linking the Nam Bo theatre by ‘maritime and

137. I have been unable to establish if, when, and how a secret agreement was made between the DRV and Sihanouk. While some tend to deride Sihanouk, his ability to keep Cambodia afloat during this period is, in my view, extraordinary and merits a serious study. As a hypothesis, I would suggest that there may have been a secret (and desperate) DRV overture to the Prince following the Vung Ro incident in February 1965. Looking at DRV support of the Pathet Lao just to the north, it is possible that Sihanouk exploited DRV logistical desperation after Vung Ro to extract a written promise from the Vietnamese not to support the Khmer Rouge. French intelligence reported that the DRV had first tried to make a deal with Sihanouk immediately after the Geneva Accords of 1954: Goscha, Le contexte asiatique, section indochnoise.

138. Tong ket Cong lac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo (B2) trang Khang Chien chong My (Hanoi: Tong Cuc Hau Can, 1986), Luu Hanh Noi Bo, 16, 21 (note 1), 129 (note 1), 152.
Figure 5: The Maritime Ho Chi Minh Trail running through Sihanoukville
overland routes'. From the end of 1965, on directives of the Politburo, the COSVN and the southern General Office of Supplying created a special logistics ‘Group 17’, called Doan 17, to direct the supplying of Nam Bo via Sihanoukville. Hidden behind the cover of an import-export company, it was designed ‘to organize the reception of aid coming from the Trung Uong in northern Vietnam via the port of Sihanoukville and via the C4 road from Stung Treng’. It supplied above all the B2 theatre encompassing all of Nam Bo and the five provinces of southern Trung Bo.139 Recent Vietnamese internal publications confirm that ‘the Central Committee organised the supplying of B2 by the maritime route via Sihanoukville’.140

Determining the exact amount of arms and ammunitions provided to southerners via Sihanoukville is tricky. The sources are sometimes contradictory and vague. It appears that the total amount of supplies and arms imported from Cambodia for the period between mid-1965 and late 1968 is 89,352 tons of supplies, 48 per cent of which came from the northern ‘Central Committee’ or central government (Trung Uong). Fifty-one per cent of this total was purchased and/or procured in Cambodia. Of the 43,039 tons provided by the north, 15,900 tons were weapons and ammunition. This could only have arrived via the sea borne route running through Sihanoukville. Self-production only accounted for 0.8 per cent of the total (609 tons), and 0.2 per cent (190 tons) was taken from the enemy. Arms imports from North Vietnam were therefore clearly vital.141 In 1967, according to a different military source, the DRV sent to the B2 theatre 31,760 military personnel (up from the total of 13,005 dispatched in 1966); 9000 SKS rifles, 23,360 AK-47s, 17,000 RPD machineguns, and 3000 B-40 rocket launchers. The weapons were shipped through the port of Sihanoukville.142 But cereal foodstuffs and petrol products were the crucial imports from Cambodia proper. Of the 45,514 tons purchased in Cambodia from 1965 to 1968, 42,893 tons consisted of rice and foodstuffs.143 Between 1969 and 1970, the total aid Nam Bo received from or via Cambodia totalled 245,715 tons. Of this, the DRV provided 32,009 tons, of which 13,227 tons of weapons and ammunition were shipped via Sihanoukville. The rest, 209,304

139. Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo, 49-50. ‘B’ referred to the southern battlefield. In 1961, the Central Committee divided the B theatre into two smaller ones: B1 and B2. The latter consisted of all the provinces of Nam Bo, as well as the five southern provinces of MR 5 in southern Trung Bo: Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, Quang Duc, Tuyen Duc, and Lam Dong. Militarily, B2 was divided into four military regions: 6, 7, 8, 9 and Saigon-Cholon. ‘B1’ included Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Da, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Gia Lai, Kon Tom, Bac Lac. Militarily it was MR 5. ‘B3’ was created in May 1964. Referred to as the ‘Tay Nguyen Front’, it included the provinces of Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Dac Lac (detached from B1). ‘B4’ came to life in April 1966, breaking off Quang Tri and Thua Thien from B1. In June 1966, ‘B5’ was created to run the front of Route 9 and Bac Quang Tri: Tu Dien Bach Khoa, 181-2. ‘A’ referred to Viet Bac, ‘C’ to Laos, and ‘D’ (then ‘K’) to Cambodia.

140. Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo, 152.

141. Ibid., note 1.

142. Huong Tien Cong Saigon-Gia Dinh (Nam 1968) (Hanoi: Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam, Luu Hanh Noi Bo, 1988), 24. My thanks to Merle Pribbenow for bringing this rare study to my attention.

143. Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo, 57, note 1.
tons, was purchased in Cambodia and consisted mainly of rice and petrol. Beijing sent also weapons, munitions, food and medical supplies to the south via Cambodia. Between 1965 and 1967, Chinese weapons for 50,000 soldiers went through Sihanoukville. Vietnamese ports were clearly not the only ways of shipping supplies to southern Vietnam. Looking at the South China Sea in a time of war on the Indochinese peninsula brings these wider, non-national connections into focus. There is a logic to all this, and it is related to changes occurring up above and down below on the military, strategic and diplomatic fronts.

The shift in the South China Seas maritime route to Sihanoukville gave rise to new means of transport. Thanks to an improvement in relations between the People’s Republic of China and Prince Sihanouk by the mid-1960s, Chinese ships were able to dock at Sihanoukville. In March 1968, a US military intelligence report pointed to the Chinese communist vessel, the Wu Hsi, as a leading suspect in the transport of arms by sea to Cambodia. According to this source, the Wu Hsi unloaded a cargo of around 3000 tons of munitions and large pieces of artillery. Some of this went straight into the hands of General Lon Nol’s Cambodian army; the rest went to DRV/NLF forces in Nam Bo. Chinese communist vessels entering Sihanoukville had apparently gone out of their way to avoid areas patrolled by Market Time, something which increased considerably operating costs. Other sources indicated that the Hak Ly Company served as a ‘virtual subsidiary’ of the NLF. This apparent Sino-Khmer Import-Export company was financed through a Hong Kong Branch of the Bank of China. Its trucks moved ordnance from the port to Vietnamese reception points. The arms shipped through Sihanoukville included explosives, ammunition, K-50 submachine guns, B-40 antitank grenade launchers, B-41 antitank rifles and 82mm mortars. It is no secret that Lon Nol, Sihanouk’s defence minister and army chief of staff since 1955, was involved in this very lucrative trade. He even provided many of the trucks (often American GM Cs) that transported arms and supplies from Sihanoukville to the Vietnamese border. And Vietnamese communist sources no longer make an effort to downplay or deny these exchanges. On the contrary:

With regard to Cambodia, we enlisted the sympathy and support of the neutralist government of the Kingdom of Cambodia. We used the port of Sihanoukville to receive a number of aid shipments travelling through

144. Ibid., 74. As was the case in northern Vietnam after the Cao Bang victory of 1950, many analysts forget the importance of rice and medical imports. For if you cannot feed and take care of the fighting men in large-scale divisions, then they simply cannot fight. To put it bluntly, they are useless.
145. Qiang Zhai, China & the Vietnam Wars, 137. It is possible that this Chinese aid has been counted in the DRV assistance cited above.
147. For more details, see Prados, The Blood Trail, 296-9.
international waters. We paid port fees to the Royal government in accordance with international regulations and hired military transportation resources (under the command of Lon Nol) to transport the supplies to our supply receiving stations. It was thanks to this supply line that we were able to quickly ship a large quantity of weapons and ammunition, including B-40s and 12.7mm machine guns, to the battlefield which enabled us to defeat the US Junction City Operation in 1967.\textsuperscript{148}

Another Vietnamese military source confirms that arms were sent across the South China Sea to Sihanoukville in time to defend against Operation Junction City, including precious B-40 and B-41s which were essential to attacking tanks.\textsuperscript{149}

The financing of rice imports to Nam Bo was also a larger regional affair. Large-scale smuggling rings emerged by late 1965 to meet Nam Bo's massive needs for rice imports during this crucial period of the war. US intelligence suspected the agents of large smuggling rings in Hong Kong to be dealing with the Cambodian National Import-Export Agency (SONEXIM) in order to sell rice to Nam Bo at high profits. Payment was often made through banks in Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{150} Between 1966 and 1969, the DRV paid US$50 million dollars in port fees and transportation charges for supplies passing through Sihanoukville.\textsuperscript{151}

As during the war against the French, the DRV's national currency, the dong, was worthless in these smuggling networks. Indeed, just as important as arms, was the DRV 'export' of millions of US dollars and purchase of RVN currency ('product Z') to its agents in Cambodia and Nam Bo via shipments through Sihanoukville.\textsuperscript{152} And as during the war against the French, Chinese regional networks helped the DRV get rice to the famished B2 theatre. As this American report explains, rice farmers in Cambodia 'discovered the advantages of circumventing SONEXIM and its purchasing agent, the Royal Office of Cooperation (OROC). They sell their rice to Chinese merchants', who, in turn, 'sell the rice where the price is highest'.\textsuperscript{153} Sino-Cambodian merchants, many from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, were deeply involved in smuggling rice and arms to Nam Bo. The US suspected a certain Kuo Wen Chuan of running a particularly notorious smuggling ring. Though exiled to Hong Kong for smuggling in May 1967, he allegedly continued to direct a 'vast network of clandestine operations'. He was even said to own the An Giang Shipping Company of Hong Kong, which was deeply involved in shipping arms, ammunition and rice to

\textsuperscript{148.} Tong Ket cuoc Khang Chien chong My Cuu Nuoc: Thang Loi va Bai Hoc (Hanoi: NXB Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 1995), Luu Hanh Noi Bo, 221-2.

\textsuperscript{149.} Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo, 59.

\textsuperscript{150.} 'VC/NVA Use of Cambodia for Logistics Support (U)', 24.

\textsuperscript{151.} Tong Ket cuoc Khang Chien chong My Cuu Nuoc, 221-2.

\textsuperscript{152.} Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo, 55-6.

\textsuperscript{153.} 'VC/NVA Use of Cambodia for Logistics Support (U)', 24.
Nam Bo via Sihanoukville. War of course is always profitable and these underground networks opened up all sorts of geographical, historical and sociological alliances. As a recent Vietnamese study coyly puts it:

Cadres played the role of capitalist businessmen and plantation owners; they lived in villas, drove automobiles, and wore nice clothes, using their legal status to collect and supply tons of rice and bushels of dried fish to supply our base areas in South Vietnam. Truly, this was a multifaceted revolutionary struggle!

Indeed.

Whatever the details of the purchasing and transportation, it is clear that the maritime opening of Sihanoukville between late 1965 and early 1970 was a crucial source of arms and foodstuffs for the southern war effort. The combination of the South China Sea, the use of international vessels, and access to Sihanoukville allowed the DRV to link the northern Vietnamese rearguard to Nam Bo via the sea, and not just through the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail. As it is now conceded in Hanoi, access to Cambodia and the supplies coming from and through there was crucial to maintaining the war against the US during what would be the most difficult years. One can see why in several meetings with Pol Pot between 1965 and early 1970, Vietnamese communists were reluctant to support the Khmer Rouge’s hostile policy towards Sihanouk.

CLOSING OF SIHANOUKVILLE AND REOPENING OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ON THE EASTERN SIDE

Regardless of who was to blame, the coup d'état of March 1970 that overthrew Sihanouk and brought Lon Nol to power as President was, for the DRV and the NLF, a strategic nightmare. With Sihanouk’s ‘leaning to one side’ finally over, the US pushed Lon Nol firmly their way. The maritime route running through Sihanoukville port and Lon Nol’s trucking of DRV arms and supply up Route 4 were immediately terminated. The American General Staff was finally in a position to attack the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail crossing north-eastern Cambodia and southern Laos and strangle the enemy in the south. That is what the US and the Republic of Vietnam attempted in 1970 and 1971. Hanoi knew it and it is no accident they threw their best divisions into ferocious battles in southern Laos. They had no intention of losing their access to southeastern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.

Without the South China Sea route on either side of the tip of Ca Mau, Hanoi had to act fast to push the overland Ho Chi Minh Trail as far south as possible via north-eastern Cambodia. Far from an accident, in April 1970 the Politburo ordered the leaders of 559 to extend the Trail further southwards in order to supply the B2

154. ‘VC/NVA Use of Cambodia for Logistics Support (U)’, 25.
155. Tran Danh Ba Muoi Nam, 173.
156. Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo, 227.
157. Ibid., 53.
theatre via eastern Cambodia. This must have simply been an incredibly tense time for the DRV General Staff, given that the maritime route remained blocked until 1972 at least. Quite literally, the DRV had to move inwards strategically. In May 1970, the Politburo fired directives to B2 leaders explaining that ‘Indochina was one’, key strategic concept to be applied with the utmost vigour and as rapidly as possible. There was no other choice after 1970. The DRV survived the attacks in eastern Cambodia and southern Laos in 1970-71; and they never stopped trying to supply the south. In this larger geo-strategic and historical context, it is quite possible that DRV logistics were most vulnerable between 1970 and 1973. The American blockade of Haiphong harbour could not have helped.

The Paris Accords of early 1973 and the paralysis of Nixon and Kissinger by Watergate marked a turning point in DRV logistics. The US agreed to halt its bombing of Laos and northern Vietnam. Whatever the reasons on high, down below the DRV stepped up its overland aid to southern Vietnam via southern Laos. ‘Thanks to the international conjuncture and the sinking of the Nixon administration, the DRV renewed its attempts to use the South China Sea to open sea routes to the eastern face of southern Vietnam. Following the Paris Accords, the DRV had no qualms about increasing arms shipments. In early 1973, for example, Brigade 125 delivered 3000 tons of arms to MR 4 ‘in an extremely short period of time’. In the same year, it provided 12,000 tons of arms to Quang Binh reception points. Both points were located above the DMZ, but the goal of these preparations was obvious. In 1974, 15,000 tons of goods were shipped southwards. And finally, during the ‘Battle of Ho Chi Minh’ in early 1975, convoy 125 transported 17,473 cadres, 40 tanks, and 7786 tons of arms. The maritime route was back in action as the US surveillance—above all its naval surveillance of the DRV—in the South China Sea declined.

CONCLUSION
If the Ho Chi Minh Trail running southwards through Laos and Cambodia to southern Vietnam is well known today, we should no longer be surprised to learn of the existence

158. Ibid., 66, citing Trich chi thi cua TCHC gui BTL 559 thang 4/1970, thang 5/1970, thang 1/1971 and also 81, decision taken by the Trung Uong and the Quan Uy Trung Uong.

159. Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trzmg Bo, 67. This is one important reason why Vo Nguyen Giap’s famous ‘Indochinese strategy’ was not really applied in its entirety until April 1970. It was only then that the DRV/VWP agreed to begin supporting the Khmer Rouge, as the DRV had been doing for the Pathet Lao since 1954.

160. See Ngo Dang Loi, et al., Chong My Phong Toa Song Bien Vllng Hai Phong, in the National Library of Hanoi. The blockade of Haiphong is too large a subject to treat here; however, it must have been an essential factor.


162. Van TaiQllan Su Chien Luoc tren duong Ho Chi Minh, 118-21, esp. 118. The Khmer Rouge refused and US bombing of Cambodia continued. The DRV/VWP and COSVN leadership must have been furious with Pol Pot’s party. Conversely, the idea of ‘Indochinese revolution and strategy’ must have sounded very hollow to Pol Pot.

163. Nguyen Tu Duong, Duong Mon tren Bien, 373-7, and Lu Doan 125, 39-41.
of another, parallel route emerging from the South China Sea’s western periphery and which was directly linked to the wars for Vietnam on the eastern part of the Southeast Asian continent. Indeed, the wars for Vietnam between 1945 and 1975 were much more than simple ‘land wars in Southeast Asia’. The sea was involved from the beginning, stretching from the southern Chinese coast to Sihanoukville and extending into international waters bordering on the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand. The very fact that the Ho Chi Minh Trail got its start and its name as a coastal route during the war against the French makes this clear. That said, this essay does not try to play one up in favour of the other. The aim has been to try to show how land and sea routes intersected in complex ways both ‘down below’ in terms of human and physical geography and ‘up above’ in terms of regional and international conjunctures and the geo-strategic and diplomatic interests at stake. I have tried to suggest that war, like peace, has to be analysed in such a wider perspective in order to pick up on the complex interplays and connections cutting horizontally across national and physical boundaries, through various means of transportation and logistics, and vertically by linking decisions taken on high in Hanoi, Beijing, Moscow and Washington to how they worked themselves out on the roads, canals and waves below—and often how they just did not.164 By ‘looking at the wars for Vietnam’ from the South China Sea between 1945 and 1975, we can better ‘see’ these connections.

It is only by analysing these wars in such a wider perspective that we will be able to understand better why and how General Nguyen Binh could speak in 1951, from deep within the jungles of Cambodia, of the links between the maritime and overland Ho Chi Minh trails on the one hand and the impact of the CCP victory in 1949, the outbreak of war in Korea and the likely US response on the other.165 A wider analytical geo-historical approach to war will allow us to grasp more comprehensively why the seaborne route was so important in the early 1960s and why it is a mistake to assume that the famous, overland Ho Chi Minh Trail reached easily, successfully, and inevitably into all of southern Vietnam on the road to victory in 1975. It did not. By viewing the war beyond national borders, say from the sea, we will be able to understand why Cambodia was so vital to the DRV between 1965 and 1970. Perhaps then we might be able to grasp that the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’ was not simply ‘one’ direct road supplying all the southern forces of the DRV. Rather it was a complex network of overland, maritime and even river routes, adapting and changing like a sponge being squeezed by the various human, physical, military, and diplomatic factors designed to shut it down and those so desperate to keep it alive.

164. This also implies that French and American armed services and their intelligence services were not always dupes. Indeed, there is a lack of serious studies of French, American and Vietnamese intelligence services during the wars for Vietnam.

165. Before his death in Cambodia, he was writing a study for the Ministry of Defence. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible that Nguyen Binh’s recall to the north in 1951 was not entirely designed to fire him for his military and ‘political mistakes’, but to discuss the new stage in supplying the southern resistance in the context of the Cold War.