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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

*Problems Posed for North Vietnam by  
Death of Politburo Member  
Nguyen Chi Thanh*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
11 July 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Problems Posed for North Vietnam by the Death of  
Politburo Member Nguyen Chi Thanh

Summary

Nguyen Chi Thanh's death of a heart attack in Hanoi on 6 July poses two immediate and important problems for the remaining ten members of the politburo and could have certain longer range and deep ramifications for the party leadership. The most immediate problems facing the Hanoi leaders are the questions of replacing Thanh both as head of the Communist apparatus in South Vietnam and as a full member of the politburo. Choosing a replacement for Thanh in each of these positions could occasion considerable maneuvering within the politburo between the militants and the slightly more moderate elements of that body. The militants, led by party first secretary Le Duan, will probably try to appoint one of their own men to fill Thanh's shoes. The moderates, led by Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, may well try to replace him with one of their men or at least to divide Thanh's many responsibilities among several candidates, thus cutting back on militant strength.

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Nguyen Chi Thanh's Background

1. Nguyen Chi Thanh's combined military background and political experience will make him difficult to replace. He was the only individual besides General Vo Nguyen Giap to hold the rank of senior general in the armed forces, and he was a leading member of the militant wing of the North Vietnamese politburo. He also held a key post on the party secretariat which is responsible for the implementation of party policies. As a member of the Party Military Committee, he also had a voice in running the armed forces. Since early 1965 Thanh had been the number one man at the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the political and military headquarters for the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam.

2. During his two-and-a-half year tour in South Vietnam, Thanh is believed to have held decision-making authority in both the planning and implementation of the strategy and deployment of Communist forces, subject only to review by the full politburo in Hanoi. Thanh's assignment to COSVN in early 1965 was probably prompted by Communist optimism that one final military push against ARVN forces would bring their revolution to a successful conclusion. The leadership in Hanoi wanted a man on the spot who could pull off this military victory and also speak with the authority of the politburo on subsequent political developments.

3. Thanh was apparently hand picked for this job by party first secretary Le Duan--the principal architect of revolutionary strategy in the South. Thanh had the political rank to assume direction of this operation; he had extensive experience in military affairs as the former head of the political department of the army, he held the highest military rank the country could give, and he was philosophically in tune with Le Duan's choice of militant and aggressive solutions to important problems.

4. Shortly after Thanh's arrival in South Vietnam he was faced with the necessity of developing both strategy and tactics to deal with the rapid introduction of US combat forces. Thanh believed that

the Communists could sustain the momentum they had built up against ARVN and that the Communists could continue to launch large-scale attacks against US forces. He argued that the US hoped to force the Communists to abandon mobile warfare tactics and to return to guerrilla warfare.

5. Thanh's views did not go unopposed. Opposition apparently came from both old-time Viet Cong guerrilla leaders and from members of the regular military establishment in the North, presumably led by Defense Minister Giap. These men argued for more emphasis on the guerrillas to tie down and disperse the US forces. Thanh's opponents saw his approach as putting too great a strain on manpower resources in the South. They complained that he robbed guerrilla units of manpower in order to bolster main force strength quickly. Thanh's call for the infiltration of large numbers of regular units from North Vietnam also placed considerable strain on manpower and training resources in the North.

6. Thanh was given the forces he asked for in 1965 and early 1966, but the inability of these forces successfully to maintain the initiative against heavy US fire power and mobility seriously undercut his thesis. By the fall of 1966, Vietnamese Communist commentary on the proper conduct of the war emphasized the importance of guerrilla tactics and urged a more balanced use of main forces and guerrillas in the war with the US--an apparent compromise between Thanh and his opponents. Thanh remained commander of the Communist forces in South Vietnam and as late as 31 May 1967 he published an authoritative commentary on the war in the South.

#### Replacing Thanh in South Vietnam

7. If the politburo wants to replace Thanh with someone of nearly comparable status, only a few men would appear to be likely candidates. Le Duc Tho, the sixth ranking member of the politburo, is a former deputy commander of Viet Cong forces, serving under Le Duan in the war against France. For the last ten years or more he has been holding the important post of chief of the Party Organization

Department, which controls the party in South Vietnam as well as in the North. He was chosen to head the funeral committee for Nguyen Chi Thanh and is known to be a hardliner and close to Le Duan.

8. Another possible candidate, because of his former experience in the South, is Pham Hung, a Viet Cong leader who came north around 1954. He is the number five man on the politburo. Since his return north, however, Hung has devoted his primary and almost exclusive attention to the fiscal management of the DRV economy and is regarded as a follower of Phan Van Dong rather than of Le Duan. General Van Tien Dung, chief of staff of the North Vietnamese Army, is an alternate member of the politburo and also served in South Vietnam previously. As such he might make a good choice to replace Thanh at COSVN.

#### An Opening in the Politburo

9. Thanh's death not only poses a problem in relation to the top spot in South Vietnam, it also raises the question of replacing him on the politburo. This is the first time since at least 1960 that an opening has occurred in the governing body of the party. Thanh's career over the past ten years was very closely tied to Le Duan--number two man in the party and leader of the more militant element in the North Vietnamese leadership. Nguyen Chi Thanh's promotion to senior general occurred in the late 1950s shortly after Le Duan moved into the number two position in the party. Thanh was removed as head of the army's political department in 1961--apparently after significant differences with Defense Minister Giap. Giap argued for the development of a professional military but Thanh pushed for the use of the army as a political and economic force to promote social reform, particularly in agriculture. This argument was ultimately resolved in Giap's favor, at least insofar as Thanh was removed as head of the army's political department. Thanh re-emerged two years later into the mainstream of party affairs to provide the cutting edge for one of Le Duan's policies--a shift away from traditional North Vietnamese neutrality in the Sino-Soviet dispute toward support

of Peking. Although almost all of the politburo eventually and apparently with some reluctance endorsed this move publicly, Nguyen Chi Thanh was the first and most outspoken to use Chinese-style invectives in criticizing the Soviet "revisionists."

10. The kinds of differences which have separated Giap and Nguyen Chi Thanh over the years are believed to reflect fundamental differences within the entire North Vietnamese politburo. Thanh's death could compound those differences. If the leadership intends to replace him immediately, General Giap and those who think like him will most certainly urge a replacement more in tune with their more moderate and pragmatic philosophy. Premier Pham Van Dong is the leading spokesman for the moderates and over the past two years has appeared to have gained considerable power at the expense of Le Duan. Le Duan, on the other hand, holds the powerful post of party first secretary and he will be eager to replace Thanh with another militant on whom he can count for strong support.

11. If Thanh is not immediately replaced, his loss could affect the relatively even balance in the politburo. With Thanh alive, the 11-man politburo was probably divided evenly along militant/moderate lines with five militants, five moderates, and Ho Chi Minh standing above both groups as final arbiter. Although not all issues find the politburo divided clearly along militant/moderate lines, such a division is believed to be characteristic of many of the important decisions that the leadership has made in pursuing its national objectives.

12. The politburo could be expanded by the addition of one or several members. Alternate politburo member Van Tien Dung is the most likely candidate to be elevated to full politburo status. General Dung, however, is regarded as a Giap man, and his status as a professional military man might work against him. The party would not want to weight the politburo too heavily with military members.

13. Several other central committee members present themselves as likely candidates for politburo membership by virtue of their active and prominent roles in party affairs. To Huu is a possibility because of his position on the party secretariat. He would probably satisfy Le Duan's requirements for a hardliner. Xuan Thuy, the director of the party's foreign relations department, although removed as minister of foreign affairs a few years ago for reasons of health, has become extremely active in foreign affairs again and could be considered politburo material. He has appeared to take a hard line in the past on relations with the Soviet Union, but as foreign minister he was also close to Pham Van Dong, suggesting that he might make a good compromise candidate.

#### Prospects

14. A possible solution for the replacement of Thanh would be to divide up his several responsibilities among both militants and moderates. This is the kind of solution which might appeal to Ho Chi Minh, who likes to keep a balance between the two wings of the party. Such a solution might also appeal to the moderates who would see it as cutting down militant strength to some extent. There is currently some question, however, as to Ho's health and his ability to deal effectively with major problems. Ho has only made two public appearances since 15 March, once in late April for a local election and again on 7 July for Nguyen Chi Thanh's funeral. Several recent travelers to Hanoi have been told that Ho is ill and cannot receive visitors.

15. Ho's illness may be only temporary. If, however, he should become incapacitated and unable to carry the weight of arbitrating between the competing elements in the party leadership, a struggle for power might well ensue. The two major contenders for power would probably be Pham Van Dong and Le Duan. There have been some indications over the past two years that these two men hold differing views on the proper tactics to be used in regard to the war, although both men appear to share the same goal, eventual control of South Vietnam. Pham Van Dong appears

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to have greater confidence than Le Duan in the use of negotiations as a tactic in gaining control over the South whereas Le Duan seems to put more stock in the purely military aspect of the struggle. The man or men chosen to replace Nguyen Chi Thanh may provide some hint as to the relative strengths of the two men and their supporters.

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