

Gen. GIAP

DIEN BIEN PHU

**THE
MOST
DIFFICULT
DECISION**

AND OTHER WRITINGS

THE GIOI Publishers

Hanoi - 1992

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The author (left) and President Ho Chi Minh
during the Border-Liberating Campaign, 1950

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

In May 1990, together with friends from all over the world, the Vietnamese people celebrated the centenary of the birth of President Ho Chi Minh. Earlier, on 29 March 1990, an international seminar on "President Ho Chi Minh – a Hero of National Liberation and a Great Personality of Culture" was held in Hanoi, jointly sponsored by UNESCO and the Vietnam Social Sciences Committee.

President Ho Chi Minh devoted his entire life to the cause of national liberation from foreign domination, to that of achieving a bright future for the Vietnamese people, and to that of friendship among nations.

The author of this book, General Vo Nguyen Giap, lived and worked for many years by the side of President Ho, who was affectionately known to the Vietnamese people as "Uncle Ho". This document records his impressions and recollections of those years. We are pleased to be able to introduce this important book to our readers.

December 1982?

PAC BO, SOURCE OF THE STREAM⁽¹⁾

For the third time since the liberation of the South⁽²⁾ I was returning to Pac Bo, Uncle Ho's workbase from the days when not a square inch of territory in our homeland should be called free.

Our vehicle left the premises of the Cao Bang⁽³⁾ provincial Party Committee at 7 a.m. A white veil of winter mist still shrouded the mountains and foothills. As we drove through Hoa An to reach the area of Ha Quang, the sky gradually cleared. Rolling plains, hills and cone-shaped rocky mountains became visible; tiny hamlets within groves of giant bamboo; a covered bridge spanning a stream. The whole area was like a living water-colour painting. Wherever I looked the view was superb. But that was not all. This natural setting was very dear to me, recalling the days when the revolution was still in its infancy, of never-fading memories.

As we crossed a hill where work on the Ho Chi Minh Museum was nearing completion, the imposing bulk of Pac Bo came into view. Towering forest-covered mountains dominated the area. Green mountains and blue waters. The sun came out, casting a

1. Written to mark the 45th anniversary of the founding of the People's Army of Vietnam.

2. i.e. April 30, 1975, the day the south of Vietnam was completely liberated, ending the twenty-year-long domination of the U.S. backed puppet government.

3. A mountainous province in northern Vietnam, adjacent to China.

golden glow over the hills and water falls. In the crystal clear waters of the Lenin stream⁽¹⁾ – as pure as ever had been, tiny fish swam lazily round a rock lying deep on the streambed. Masses of verdant watercress floated on the surface. Mount Marx⁽²⁾, with its dense cover of trees, shrubs and rocks, stood motionless, unchanged despite the passing of time. Pac Bo cave itself lay hidden not far away on the other side of the stream, among the rocky cliffs.

I gazed at the familiar, towering mountain separating China from Vietnam, with border mark 108 on its slope. Just a half century ago, Uncle Ho called a halt at this place. After living abroad for thirty years he was once again setting foot in the land of his birth. He was by that time fifty years old; the time he had spent searching for the path to national salvation could be counted in decades. At 20, the young Nguyen Tat Thanh⁽³⁾ had left his country from Nha Rong wharf in Saigon on board a French vessel. At the age of 30, having adopted the alias Nguyen Ai Quoc⁽⁴⁾, he became a communist and participated in the founding of the Communist Party of France. At 40, he had declared the establishment of the Indochinese Communist Party. At 50, he was returning to his native land from the north, directly leading the entire people in a general insurrection aimed at regaining their independence and freedom.

Border guards at Pac Bo, members of a hero unit, escorted us along the banks of the stream. With every step, a flood of memories warmed our hearts. Jagged, moss-covered rocks lay strewn about a tiny plot of land by the side of the stream where in earlier times our Uncle often sat and worked. In 1975, after the liberation of the South, I returned to Pac Bo and planted a *kim giao* tree now tall with luxuriant foliage. Uncle Ho always en-

1,2. Names given by President Ho to a stream and mount in Pac Bo.

3,4. Aliases used by President Ho.

couraged tree planting and constantly reminded us that "each tree planted must live." On the other side of the placidly-flowing stream, he would sit fishing beneath the dense foliage. The fish in the stream were rarely lured by baits. In the garden at the Presidential Palace, he also used to sit fishing, but released any fish caught on the hook. A wooden bridge spanned the stream in front of the Coc Bo cleft – the source of the Lenin stream. The water gushed forth day and night. Many say the waters of the Coc Bo are pure and have curative qualities. Vietnamese and foreign visitors often drank the sparkling clear water here. Crossing the bridge we arrived at the place where Uncle Ho would sit preparing his corn gruel and soup made from bamboo shoots. Nearby is a clump of bamboo he planted in 1961 on his return to Pac Bo. I was deeply moved upon seeing the entrance to the cave, high on the slopes of the rugged mountain.

In the days after his return to the country, he lived initially with the family of a fellow-believer. The house was small and had frequent visitors. He asked his comrades to take him out into the forest. This small cave was chosen. It was cool, dry, and away from the attention of local inhabitants. Our Uncle was very happy with his new place of work.

Uncle Ho convened the 8th Party Plenum in a small hut on the slopes of Mount Khuoi Na, in front of Pac Bo cave. If the enemy came, just a few footsteps took one on to Chinese territory. People of various ethnic backgrounds living in Cao Bang on either side of the Sino-Vietnamese border had for generations enjoyed friendly relations. The 8th Party Plenum decided to prepare to launch an armed insurrection and establish the Viet Minh Front.

We climbed over jagged rocks to reach the cave entrance, which had been demolished in 1979. Repair work had taken some time before access to the interior was again possible. Standing outside and looking down over the wall of rock, we could still see the inscription carved into the rockface by our Uncle – 8 February 1941, the date of his first arrival at the cave.

In my mind's eye I could see Uncle in his indigo pyjamas sitting by the glowing embers during cold nights. We did not dare to light a proper fire for fear that its glow could be seen from afar. With the smoke from the fire stinging our eyes, he often used to tell us (Phung Chi Kien, Vu Anh, Pham Van Dong⁽¹⁾ and me) about the world and domestic situation and predict future events. In four or five years' time, he said, the Vietnamese revolution would triumph and our people would have a bright future.

In those early days at Pac Bo, what surprised me was how quickly and naturally he fitted in with everyone around him and his new living conditions.

While still in China, he posed as a journalist. I was able to see his card printed with the following words – Ho Chi Minh, correspondent of the "Tan Thanh Daily". Sometimes he dressed in a shirt with a stiff collar and necktie. He had directly experienced life abroad for thirty years in France, Britain and the U.S. Looking at him now, one could have mistaken his clothes, way of speaking and work habits as those of an old Nung⁽²⁾ man, now cooking rice or angling, now bathing in the stream or sleeping out in the forest. This one-time representative of the Communist International and experienced delegate from the Tours Congress⁽³⁾ who had come into contact with many world leaders now lived in harmony with those around him and in a manner no different from theirs.

As we had foreseen, preparations for the launching of the general insurrection would be extremely difficult and complex but he began them in a calm and unpretentious manner.

There was one who asked, "Where are we to obtain weapons for an armed insurrection?" He answered briefly, "Men first, weapons next. If we have the people with us we have the weapons; having the people means having everything."

1. Names of comrades working with President Ho at that time.

2. An ethnic minority in northern Vietnam.

3. The founding Congress of the French Communist Party in 1920.

He directly opened the first courses for the training of cadres at Pac Bo. During our stay in Tinh Tay, China and under his guidance, we drew up a training programme in the form of a booklet entitled "The path to liberation". It comprised five lessons - research, dissemination, training, organization and struggle.

He attached much importance to the work of the press, telling us, "The press is the body that organizes the masses for revolutionary action." Brother Dong and I had been writing press items since 1930, particularly during the period of the Popular Front⁽¹⁾. But when we showed him the document "The murmur of the stream" we had composed in Tinh Tay, he said, "This document is for your eyes alone because only you can understand it." Under his direct guidance, we published *Viet Nam Doc Lap* (Independent Vietnam). He wrote many articles for it. Before printing, articles written by him and us were given a final reading for comprehension to members of the office staff, most of them still illiterate. Poems by Uncle published in the paper often ended with a call for unity:

"Let our people remember the word 'unity'."

He himself taught the national language to people working at the office and their immediate families. He bought exercise books and wrote poetry for Miss Nong Thi Trung to encourage her in her studies.

Each week, the leader Nguyen Ai Quoc, standing member of the Eastern Bureau of the Communist International, attended meetings of the Party cell presided over by secretary Loc, a cook at the office. Uncle never missed any meetings and implemented all Party resolutions in an exemplary fashion.

Always I noted that he respected and listened attentively to what others had to say. He never railed at anybody even when

criticizing those who had made mistakes. When offering advice, he always set an example himself.

It is precisely through such actions that, after having lived for so long away from his homeland, he was so quickly able to understand the ideas, aspirations and principles of his compatriots from many different ethnic backgrounds as well as their languages and sentiments, becoming a source of encouragement and hope for everyone.

From the time that the Party Central Committee decided to prepare for armed insurrection, his primary concern was the building of a base area. Cao Bang offered many starting points for development of the movement. The people of the various ethnic groups had a long-standing tradition of resistance to foreign aggression. The local branch of the Party had been set up in 1930, and links with the outside world were easily re-established. Cao Bang, however, was located far from the delta region and the Central Committee. He and the Central Committee advocated the establishment of the Cao Bang base and at the same time, consolidation of the Bac Son base and the opening up of communication routes so as to form a vast strategic area bordering on the delta provinces. In his estimation, Thai Nguyen⁽¹⁾ could be turned into a base capable of taking the offensive in any advance and maintaining the defensive in a retreat, both in the coming revolution and in the long run. When the movement in Cao Bang swiftly spread to other areas, I was appointed head of the Southern Advance Vanguard Unit, with the task of opening up a communication route linking Cao Bang with Thai Nguyen. Nineteen teams from the unit moved independently into the areas which were still not organized and tried to open up a route to the delta. The team under my command started from Kim Ma, moved through Khuoi Lin, Coc Dan, Ha Hieu and Khuoi Na up to Pi

1. The period 1936-39 when the Indochinese Communist Party (i.e. the present Communist Party of Vietnam) switched over to operating legally.

1. A province in northern Vietnam which now belongs to Bac Thai province, 79 kilometres from Hanoi.

Cay, crossed the Phi U-oac Range and advanced towards Nghia Ta.⁽¹⁾ where we met with the National Salvation troops⁽²⁾.

My most profound memories of Pac Bo are the meeting with Uncle Ho in mid-December 1944, when he had just returned from China after establishing contact with Allied Forces. Throughout this time there was brutal repression by the French. Seething with hatred, the people were ready to launch the uprising. The Cao-Bac-Lang interprovincial committee decided to mobilize them for armed struggle. The day was almost upon us when news came of his return. Vu Anh and I made an urgent trip to meet him and report on the situation. We said, "The route to the south is now open. Our self-defence and guerrilla forces are combat-ready. The people have prepared themselves and everybody is waiting for the order."

Calmly, Uncle Ho said, "At the moment our political strength is not yet sufficiently developed in every aspect while our armed forces are too dispersed. If Cao-Bac-Lang launched an uprising alone, the enemy would certainly concentrate his forces of repression, causing losses to the people and the movement."

As we reflected upon this, he continued, "For the time being, we must find a new form of action in line with the new situation. Our political strength has suffered major setbacks and needs to be restored and developed energetically and evenly in all directions. Our guerrilla and self-defence forces are still too dispersed and inexperienced in the area of armed struggle. Now it is imperative for us to select a number of our most dedicated and determined fighters and muster our weapons to organize an army of liberation as our main force."

1. Names of places in Cao Bang and Bac Can, two mountainous provinces in northern Vietnam (the latter now belongs to Bac Thai province).

2. One of the revolutionary military units at that time.

That very evening, Uncle Ho assigned to me the task of organizing the Liberation Army of Vietnam. The next day, Vu Anh, Le Quang Ba⁽¹⁾ and I climbed a hill behind the cave where we discussed the matter. Hoang Sam was made leader of the unit and Xich Thang its political instructor. We were in the middle of a heated discussion when Uncle Ho arrived to give his consent to our proposals, adding simply that the word "propaganda" should be added to the name of the unit so that everybody would remember that political activity was now more important than military activity. He said, "The time is approaching. We must take urgent action within a month and the first battle must be successful." Once again he reminded, "We must place our trust firmly in the people. No enemy can destroy us if we rely firmly on the people."

I was filled with excitement on being assigned this new task. I dreamed of the moment when the red gold-starred flag would be planted on the top of Mount Phia U-oac, although for one instant the thought flashed across my mind that my life might end in the forest-covered mountains of Cao-Bac-Lang.

I stayed overnight with Uncle Ho in the Pac Bo cave. A good deal of time had passed since I had seen him last, so that night we talked for a long time. Past midnight, he said all of a sudden: "In revolutionary work, common interests must come before everything else." I have always kept in mind those words of his which still ring in my ears today. It was a simple truth indeed but would be no easy task. This life of his without a single moment of individualism, was a bright shining example for everyone.

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I wished that the day could be longer and the roads better so that this time I could revisit all the places where I had received assistance from the people in the dark days of struggle on the territory of Cao Bang. But it was not possible. Very limited time

1. Member of the Party Committee of Cao Bang province at that time.

had been allowed for the trip due to the difficulties involved. Grateful thanks are due to the provincial leaders for their assistance which enabled me, after my arrival in Pac Bo, to visit Tam Kim commune where Phai Khat hamlet is located. It is through this village that one can reach a forest named after Tran Hung Dao (a general who drove the Mongol invaders from Vietnam at the end of the 13th century). I knew it had not been easy for the local leadership to arrange this.

A guide named Nong Van Lac had been the first Party member from this commune and we had shared many hardships leading up to the pre-insurrection period. With us was the Party secretary of Nguyen Binh district, the son of Xich Thang, political instructor of the Vietnam People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation.

Forty-five years had flown by. How much we had missed one another! Many of us could hardly wait for this moment to arrive so we could meet again. More than a few had passed away since those days. On my way from Hanoi to Cao Bang, I dropped into Ngan Son cemetery to visit the graves of Phung Chi Kien and Bang⁽¹⁾. I lit several of the joss-sticks I had bought at Na Phac market where a female vendor resolutely refused to accept payment from me. My heart filled with sadness. Na Phac and Nguyen Binh streets had been bustling with activity, and the wild roses and daisies of this upland region were extremely beautiful, but the final resting places of my friends looked lonely and desolate amid the yellowing grass. They had sacrificed their lives for what we have today and yet could never witness the glorious victories of the revolution and the people. Next I visited the grave of Sister Thanh who died a few years before.

Route 3b was dusty full of potholes. I was unable to get to the hero village of Minh Tam, the native village of Xich Thang, where

1. Secretary of the Personnel Department of Bac Can province at that time.

many a family had sheltered us during the enemy's "white terror" campaign. I was filled with even greater sadness on learning that the villagers had repaired the road to make it accessible to my vehicle.

We stopped at a crossroads near the district town of Nguyen Binh, in front of a signpost pointing the way to the Tran Hung Dao forest.

The forest lies on the far side of the Chom Ru Pass which runs between Tam Kim and Hoang Hoa Tham villages. A veteran of the former Liberation Army from the Dao Tien ethnic group, who for decades had not returned to this forest, was still able to lead us to our destination without hesitation.

The views of old remained unchanged. This forested area was high up on the hill, remote, and had not seen another human being over a long period of time.

Just forty-five years ago on 22 December, I had, at this very spot, read out Uncle Ho's instructions on the establishment of the Vietnam People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation. He wrote, "The Vietnam People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation shall be the elder brother, and hopes to have more little brother units as soon as possible. Although at the beginning it is still small in size its future is bright. It is the starting point of the liberation army and it is able to move throughout the length and breadth of the country."

I continued to read out the Ten Oaths of Honour of the national salvation fighters. Today it seemed that the forest-covered hillsides still resounded to the shouts of officers and fighting men from many different ethnic backgrounds (Kinh, Tay, Dao, H'Mong and so on). "We vow to sacrifice everything for the homeland of Vietnam and fight to the last drop of blood for the sake of national independence and democracy."

On behalf of the community, I read out an appeal which ended with the following words: "From this moment on, all

comrades-in-arms shall follow the banner, move forward on the path of battle and continue advancing until the day the entire nation is liberated."

To celebrate the founding of the revolutionary armed forces, the local people brought gifts including pigs and chickens. but we just ate a meal of rice with nothing added to mark the beginning of what would be a hard life. We then set off to fight the first battle.

We carried out to the letter Uncle Ho's instructions that "the first battle must be won." On the following two days alone, a Liberation Army platoon destroyed two enemy forts, Phai Khat and Na Ngan. Both attacks were carried out at such lightning speed that the enemy was unable to respond. Not a single life was lost on our side. With the weapons captured from the enemy, in just a few days, the first platoon became a company.

Regarding these first military actions, a French historian wrote that the attacks were clearly aimed at capturing weapons and boosting the people's morale but they were carried out "with perfect precision, with great courage and in a systematic manner", they also proved, as summed up in a French report, that "the Viet Minh troops are led by commanders well-versed in guerrilla warfare techniques and the attackers are well trained, disciplined and audacious."

In April 1945 I was summoned to the Bac Ky (Ton Kin) Military Conference chaired by Party General Secretary Truong Chinh. The national salvation troops and Vietnam People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation were brought together to form the Liberation Army of Vietnam. In August 1945 a National Conference of Party officials held at Tan Trao decided to unify all the revolutionary armed forces throughout the country under the command of the Liberation Army of Vietnam.

Just as Uncle Ho had predicted, the Liberation Army rapidly expanded and , along with the entire people, made the August Revolution a success. It was present everywhere, from north to

south, and became the backbone of the all-people war, steadily assuming more and more difficult tasks throughout the 30 years of struggle for liberation of the homeland and at the same time accomplishing its international duties with great honour. This was the People's Army of Vietnam , the soldiers of Uncle Ho, making its first appearance in the history of the nation.

Throughout the long-drawn-out war, the first fighters of the Liberation Army built by Uncle Ho made their contributions to the army and revolution in accordance with their abilities and no one backed down half-way or wavered before the enemy. Everyone held fast to the oaths of allegiance made during those first days and dedicated his entire life to the cause of the people and the homeland.

I carried along with care a banyan tree taken from Uncle Ho's garden and planted it in the Tran Hung Dao forest on the very spot where the People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation was founded.

From Road 3b, as we travelled along a road temporarily opened at the top of the pass to allow our vehicle through, the mountains and forests around the former village of Tam Long came into view.

After nearly 50 years, nature here had remained virtually unchanged. Still the same tall immovable mountains, dense vegetation, creeks and rivers and the same terraced fields below. Houses on stilts, mud-walled huts, tiled roofs curved upwards at both ends behind rows of slender bamboo. I know by heart almost every mountain, hill, stream, village and hamlet in this region.

There was both laughter and tears as we met again. Some of the villagers presented me with honey and fruit, others with embroideries and kerchiefs. Again and again, there were tears in my eyes. Many changes had occurred; all the people I was able to meet again were much advanced in years but remained as idealistic as in the old days without the slightest wavering in their dedication to the revolution.

There was no let-up in the conversation, but the time came when we had to take our leave. Lines of people crossed the stream to follow the car as far as they could.

Once again I saw the camellia tree beside the stream where our troops had drilled before their attack on Phai Khat. Half of the trunk had been eaten away but its leafy branches remained fresh and green and were reflected in the waters of the stream. The sight made my heart turn over.

Forty-five years had elapsed but Phai Khat village was still poor. Little had been done to help those who had devoted almost all their lives to the revolution.

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My December pilgrimage had come to an end. Once again I had come back to Pac Bo, the source of the stream.

I had returned here when our land became one nation again – from the mountains and forests of Pac Bo to Nha Rong wharf⁽¹⁾, and when the people of the entire nation were moving along the path of renovation initiated by the Party. East-West relations were moving towards a reduction in tension. But the struggles between socialism and capitalism, and between national independence movements and neo-colonialism, were no less intense.

As in the years when Uncle Ho was still alive, each time problems cropped up on the battlefield, I would come to his house on stilts at the Presidential Palace and afterwards felt calm and optimistic again.

In him we found an innate confidence in the future of the nation and of mankind, an immense love for his country and compatriots, love for humanity, intense indignation at injustice and a heartfelt desire to bring freedom and happiness to everyone.

1. In Ho Chi Minh City (southern Vietnam) from where President Ho left the country to seek the path to national salvation.

He wrote about his own ideals and aspirations in a very simple way: "I have but one desire – a burning desire – to work in such a way that our country may be totally independent, our people completely free and all our compatriots, wherever they live, might have enough food to eat, clothes to wear and a proper education."

His path consisted of linking love of country with socialism. On his banner appear prominently the following golden words: "Independence, Freedom, Happiness" – for his own nation and all others. This was the crystallization of a process of dialectical unity between national independence and socialism, between genuine patriotism and flawless internationalism.

His real genius lies in the discovery of this path, which constituted his strength and that of the nation and of all of us.

For Uncle Ho, the revolution has to rely essentially on our own strength while at the same time working to build international support. To him the noble ideals of the revolution, when held deep in the hearts of the masses and our compatriots, will become a boundless strength. To him, this is independence, self-government, creativeness, continuing renovation and non-deviation from aims and ideals. "All for the people, all by the people."

Half a century ago, when Uncle Ho first arrived at Pac Bo, our entire people from north to south were languishing under the oppressive yoke of the enemy.

Following his path, we have defeated every invader, and won back national independence and unification.

Following his path, we will have civilization, happiness and prosperity and will succeed in building a society in which the free development of each and every individual is the basic condition for the free development of all human beings.

Pac Bo, source of the spring, keeps flowing. The path of Ho Chi Minh will forever be our path.

THE MOST DIFFICULT DECISION ⁽¹⁾

One morning in early October 1953, from the headquarters of the General Staff I went to Uncle Ho's dwelling place. Autumn had come bringing with it new hopes and new anxieties. There was tension in the air. It was unusual that at this time of the year, groups of officers responsible for battlefield preparations had not yet set out. Where the major battle of the dry season would take place had still not been determined.

From Diem Mac to Luc Gia ⁽²⁾ was several hours on horseback. It was raining. The muddy trail ran by the foot of Mount Hong through dense forests of reeds, terraced fields and tiny scattered hamlets. Around mid-morning we arrived at Tin Keo, a hamlet of Luc Gia village which lay at the foot of the mountain. From here a path led to Tan Trao through the Gia Pass. Just a short distance up the slope, we could already see tiny bamboo huts here and there on the mountain side among clusters of reeds. Uncle Ho lived at Khuoi Tat, a tiny hamlet inhabited by the Dao minority right on the mountaintop. He often used this hut as a venue for meetings of the Political Bureau. The bamboo windows had been propped open. Inside the house was a large bamboo table and several seats made from lengths of giant bamboo. From

1. Article written to mark the 35th anniversary of the historic Dien Bien Phu victory.

2. Names of places in Thai Nguyen province (now Bac Thai province)

the hut we could see the terraced fields at the foot of the mountain. In the middle of the fields stood an old tree. Each time we returned here for a meeting, we looked out at it as if meeting an old friend again. The following spring I returned to Tin Keo. On the site of the old hut rows of hibiscus bushes were still flowering, but in the fields the old tree was no longer to be seen – it had been carried away during a deluge.

Very soon Uncle Ho, Truong Chinh ⁽¹⁾ and Pham Van Dong ⁽²⁾ arrived. Nguyen Chi Thanh ⁽³⁾ did not come as he was sick. Hoang Van Thai ⁽⁴⁾ was summoned to the meeting on this occasion.

I began my report on the enemy situation.

In May, Henri Navarre had replaced ~~Rafel~~ Salan as commander-in-chief of the French Expeditionary Corps. This four-star general soon showed his courage and dynamism. He parachuted troops into Lang Son far to our rear, ran large-scale mop-up operations in Binh-Tri-Thien ⁽⁵⁾ and the Plain of Reeds ⁽⁶⁾ and launched a series of operations in the Bac Bo delta. In August, he suddenly withdrew French troops from their important base at Na San.

Throughout the summer, our troops gathered for an attack on the base. Na San was a dry season objective because the mountains were for us more favourable battlefields than the delta plains. The north-west was already our chosen direction. The enemy withdrawal from Na San had considerable implications for our winter-spring strategy. In the highlands of Bac Bo, the French

1. Party General Secretary at that time.

2. Politburo member at that time.

3. Politburo member and Head of the General Political Department at that time.

4. Party Central Committee member and Chief of Staff.

5. Names of places in central Vietnam, now Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien-Hue provinces.

6. Names of places in southern Vietnam.

maintained only two small forces – in Lai Chau⁽¹⁾ and Hai Ninh⁽²⁾. A proposal was made for the elimination of these two bases in order to completely liberate the Sino-Vietnamese border region. These were the enemy's most vulnerable positions.

This winter-spring strategy, however, aimed to destroy an important part of the enemy's strength in order to force a new direction in the war. For a long time now, our fighting men had dreamed of the day they could return to the delta to liberate their native villages. But the delta would be a hard nut to crack. The fortified bunkers built by Delattre de Tassigni were still there. Now Navarre had assembled the strongest mobile force since the beginning of the war, ready and waiting to do battle with us.

Uncle Ho sat there, self-composed, a cigarette held between two fingers. Suddenly his eyes flashed with concentration. He lifted his hand from the table and clenched his fist: "The French are gathering their mobile forces together to build up their strength. Have no fear! We will make them disperse those forces and this strength will no longer exist..." he said spreading out his hand, each finger pointing in a different direction.

I continued with my report. Of late, with additional intelligence sources, we had become aware of the menacing Franco-American strategy embodied in the Navarre plan. This dry season, Navarre would conduct pacification campaigns in southern Vietnam and avoid clashes with our main force in the northern battlefield. French troops would use every means by which to attack the liberated zone and break through to our rear with the aim of wearing down our main force and upsetting our offensive strategy in the main battlefield. At the same time, Navarre was continuing to build up a formidable mobile force in an attempt to realize his strategic objectives, namely crushing our main force divisions in a decisive battle during the next dry season. He estimated that all this could be achieved within eighteen months.

1, 2. Names of two provinces in northern Vietnam, near the Vietnam - China border.

The army's Party Central Committee put forward the proposal that in order to retain and further seize the initiative, we should use part of our main force, in co-ordination with local forces, to stage attacks at key strategic points where the enemy appeared vulnerable in an attempt to destroy the enemy's vital forces, extend the liberated zone and force the enemy to disperse his mobile reserves to cope with the situation. Continuing efforts would be made to widen the gap between concentration and dispersal of forces facing the enemy in order to create a new battle situation and gain the advantage. Developments would be closely monitored and when the opportunity arose, we would regroup and assemble our main force in order to destroy an important part of the enemy's vital forces and bring about a change in the war situation.

On the northern battlefield, a military operation would be launched in the northwest to wipe out the remaining occupation forces at Lai Chau and pin down the enemy in northern Laos. This second battlefield would be pushed forward to central Laos and the third to southern Laos. We would ask the Pathet Lao Liberation Army to co-ordinate action with the VPA in launching offensives in these two directions, aiming to destroy the enemy's lifeblood and expand the liberated areas. The fourth battlefield would be in the northern part of Tay Nguyen. The vast liberated area in the 5th Interzone would be the target of enemy attacks this dry season. We would boldly use the bulk of our main force troops in the 5th Interzone to push forward to mountainous areas north of Tay Nguyen. This was really a measure designed to wipe out the enemy's vital force and at the same time defend the liberated areas of the 5th Interzone effectively. Guerrilla warfare would be stepped up in southern and south-central Vietnam and behind enemy lines on the plains of the northern delta so as to pin down enemy troops while forcing the French to redeploy their mobile reserves to different battlefronts. On the main northern battlefield, we had plans in hand for defending the liberated zones and concealing a number of powerful units in mobile positions able to take immediate action against any break-out attempts by the enemy. If we could just frustrate enemy efforts to regroup the Navarre Plan to a large extent would be a failure.

Uncle Ho asked, "What would the enemy's reaction be if we moved our troops to the northwest?"

"He may strengthen his garrison in order to hold on to the northwest or make an incursion into the liberated zone in an attempt to force our troops to pull back. He could also withdraw his troops from Lai Chau, in which case the whole of the northwest would be liberated."

"Would we be able to draw the enemy's mobile forces in other directions?"

"Apart from the northwest and northern Laos, Tay Nguyen together with central Laos and southern Laos are particularly vulnerable areas which the enemy cannot afford to abandon."

The meeting approved the strategy mapped out by the Army's Party Central Committee and offered further important ideas, stressing the following guideline: "Energy, initiative, mobility and flexibility."

At the end of the meeting, Uncle Ho said, "The northwest must be the main area of activity for us and other battlefronts will join the action. That main direction will for the present remain unchanged but during operations this may change. There must be flexibility in our conduct of the war."

Neither in the Navarre Plan or in our strategy for the winter-spring campaign had the name Dien Bien Phu so far cropped up. But Navarre's fate was sealed right from the time of the Tin Keo meeting.

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In mid-October, Navarre took the initiative by launching a major operation codenamed "Seagull". Thirty-four enemy battalions launched a massive break-out at Ninh Binh. We had only Division 320 on the spot to pin down enemy troops, but our fighting men in the delta wiped out thousands. After 20 days of attempting to break out, and taking heavy casualties without result, the enemy battalions pulled back to their starting positions.

We fought hard to retain the initiative and prevent Navarre from prosecuting the war any further. A meeting of field commanders from all over the country except distant southern Vietnam, was convened as scheduled.

On October 15, our first division advanced to the northwest. On November 20 and 21, while the conference to give our information on the winter-spring campaign strategy drawn up by the Politburo was being held, I was able to report that six battalions of French troops had been parachuted into Dien Bien Phu.

We moved Division 308 up to the northwest to join up with Division 316 (dispatched earlier) to quickly advance on Lai Chau. On December 10, enemy troops in Lai Chau retreated to Dien Bien Phu. Division 316 intercepted, pursued and attacked them, eliminating 14 companies. Both divisions were ordered to quickly change direction and move in to encircle enemy troops at Dien Bien Phu. One regiment marched southward at great speed, digging in at Pom Lot to prevent an enemy withdrawal to northern Laos.

Between December 20 and 31, attacks were launched by Laotian and Vietnamese troops in central and southern Laos. The whole of Tha Khet province and the town of Atopa were totally liberated. Navarre hurriedly dispatched an army corps to the Seno base in Savannakhet and more troops to defend the town of Pakse. Navarre's massive mobile reserves were on the point of virtual disintegration.

Navarre continued to send reinforcements to Dien Bien Phu. By December 1953, about 10 battalions of enemy troops had spent time there. A major base-camp was also being constructed among the forest-covered mountains of the northwest.

In late December, I met with Uncle Ho and other comrades⁽¹⁾ to report on these new developments. The Politburo decided to destroy that vital enemy base in the northwest. The historic Dien Bien Phu campaign was about to begin.

1. Refers to members of the Politburo.

On January 1, 1954, the Politburo nominated the supreme authority and campaign command. I was concurrently chief commander and secretary of the battlefront Party Committee.

More troops were deployed to the northwest.

Division 312, concealed in the Yen Bai⁽¹⁾ forest area, was the third to be ordered to move to the northwest. Division 351, with its newly-created artillery and 37mm anti-aircraft units, crossed the Red River for the first time to join the campaign. Later on, Division 304 (minus a regiment) was also moved to Dien Bien Phu.

Before setting off, I came to Khuoi Tat to bid farewell to Uncle Ho.

He asked, "Now that you are leaving to take up your field command, have you any problems?"

"Both the deputy chief-of-staff and the deputy head of the General Political Department are already there. We will set up the forward post of the High Command. Nguyen Chi Thanh and Van Tien Dung⁽²⁾ will remain here to deal with all other matters. Our only difficulty is that being so far away means we cannot consult regularly with you and the Politburo."

"A commander-in-chief goes out to the battlefront. As a field commander, you have full authority to decide everything. This battle is vital and must be won with flying colours. Fight only when you are sure of victory."

I felt my responsibilities on this occasion would be heavy indeed.

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On January 5, 1954, together with the forward section of the High Command, I set out for the battlefront.

1. A mountainous province in northern Vietnam.

2. Chief of Staff replacing comrade Hoang Van Thai.

The forward command comprised two sections, one made up of section heads responsible for battlefield operations throughout the country and those in the fraternal countries of Laos and Cambodia, and the other of deputy section heads with special responsibility for the Dien Bien Phu campaign under the direct leadership of the battlefront command. Besides myself, the field command included Hoang Van Thai, chief-of-staff, Le Liem, chief of the Political section and Dang Kim Giang, head of the Logistics section. They all joined the battlefront Party Committee. Thai and Liem took with them Do Duc Kien, deputy head of Section 1 and Cao Pha, deputy head of Section 2 as an advance guard preparing for the campaign. Accompanying me were Tran Van Quang, head of the Operations section and Le Trong Nghia, head of the Army Intelligence section.

I had taken part in many military campaigns, including the key Border, Hoa Binh and Northwest Campaigns, but I had never before seen a spectacle as compelling as the one witnessed in the spring of that year.

Preparing for a major battle, our army and people had rebuilt and widened thousands of kilometres of road. Crossing the Red River, our jeep, a trophy won at the battle front, took us along a newly-widened road, reddish coloured in the glow of our headlights. Seeing sections of road carved out of the mountain sides beside plunging ravines we could sense the extraordinary amount of effort expended over the last few months. Most of the streams were still without bridges. Since the summer, Tran Dang Ninh, head of the General Logistics Department, had instructed army engineers and civilian volunteers to pile pieces of rock under the surface of the water for trucks to drive over.

At night, the cloud-covered mountains and forests of the northwest became a hive of activity. Trucks hauling artillery plus transport vehicles rolled by in long motorised convoys. The convoys of human beings seemed endless. Our fighting men, carrying with them heavy loads made up of weapons, munitions and food supplies, marched by in single file at a quickstep. From their ap-

pearance we could see that this year our troops were in good form and that the operation had been well-organized. The lines of carriers were very colourful. The bicycle convoys looked like a herd of little elephants. People from the delta region, many of them from behind enemy lines, carried supplies using squeaking shoulder poles. Working songs, sung with a northern accent, floated melodiously through the night air. Tunes from Zone 4 were sung in a low, soft voice. The highlanders, dressed in their colourful costumes, carried baskets of rice on their backs or led pack-animals along. A logistics officer was even escorting a herd of pigs. All were moving in one direction.

Enemy planes struck repeatedly at important sections of road, mostly on the high passes and at river crossings. The Lung Lo Pass and Ta Khoa and Co Noi river crossings, a meeting point of two roads from Hoa Binh and Yen Bai in the northwest, became huge bomb craters. Flares were dropped throughout the night onto key locations.

My thoughts returned to the problem of military and food supplies. It was a very long way from the rear guard base to the battlefield. It was not only people on the frontline who needed rice. Those porters carrying rice also needed rice to eat along the way ! This problem would become more acute if the campaign dragged on.

On the way, I followed up on the enemy situation at Dien Bien Phu and our activities on the various battlefields, particularly those of joint Lao-Vietnamese units in central and southern Laos, on guerrilla operations in southern Vietnam, and work on preparations for the northern Tay Nguyen campaign.

As we approached Son La, we found that the deputy head of Department 2 had sent a telegram saying that clouds of smoke were emanating from the enemy camp at Dien Bien Phu. I instructed him to keep a close watch and report at once on any new developments. Maybe the enemy were burning equipment that could not be transported out before a troop withdrawal ! Most of our divisions were still moving towards the northwest. If the

enemy pulled out of Dien Bien Phu now, although we had other ways of creating the conditions for wiping out the enemy's vital forces, the carrying out of the winter-spring campaign on the main battlefield clearly could not be postponed. The rainy season would arrive in no more than a few months' time. But the clouds of smoke did not reappear and the enemy at Dien Bien Phu continued to strengthen their fortifications.

In the coming battle, the responsibility incumbent on our army and people would be exceedingly heavy. I had read – I could not remember where – the words of Briere de l'Isle, commander-in-chief of the French Expeditionary Corps at the end of last century: "Officers and men of Brigade 2 ! Bear in mind the fact that since the dawn of Creation no Asian army has never been able to seize a position held by European troops." Eight years had elapsed and this statement, to us had become meaningless. But how it suddenly came back to me. Before us was a base accommodating crack units of African and European troops from the French Expeditionary Corps.

This vital base first appeared on the northern battlefield during the Hoa Binh campaign. At that time we encircled and pinned down the enemy's mobile forces in the provincial town of Hoa Binh, attacked enemy troops on Route 6 and the Da River and opened a second front on the northern plains. In this way we were able to secure quite an important victory. After the enemy had withdrawn from Hoa Binh, I came to inspect their defensive positions.

Separate fortifications linked together as a network and covering each other with the support of artillery, tanks, warplanes and troop reinforcements, clearly had a different and quite definite strength.

Another important base appeared at Na San one year later when our forces launched the campaign in the northwest. On this occasion we raced against time to attack the camp before the

newly-deployed troops could strengthen their fortifications. We destroyed two bunkers on the outer perimeter. But each attack proved too costly. Once again we had to abandon our strategy.

Such bases, with their strategic significance, became the best of the enemy's defensive measures; we had to defeat them if we wanted the movement to make headway.

From our surveys and experience acquired at Hoa Binh and Na San, we realized that our troops were not incapable of destroying the enemy's "hedgehog" defences. There were two ways. One called for simultaneous attacks using our entire armed forces. One column would make a powerful incursion into the base command post, like driving a sword into the heart of the enemy causing panic within the camp while others targeted the enemy's vulnerable points and mounted simultaneous attacks to harass them from both within and without. This was what we called our "swift attack, swift victory" strategy. The other way was to attack step by step, destroying pockets of resistance one by one and moving to wipe out the entire camp using our advantageous terrain. We called this "steady attack, steady advance".

In the report of the Army Party Central Committee and the operational strategy for Dien Bien Phu, submitted to the Politburo on December 6, 1953, we anticipated that "the duration of the Dien Bien Phu battle would be about 45 days" excluding time spent assembling our forces and carrying out preparations. The battle might begin in mid-February 1954. We estimated that it "would be the biggest battle ever seen in terrain warfare" requiring the deployment of three infantry divisions and our entire artillery, engineering and air defence forces. If one included the Campaign Command, units under its command, troops defending supply lines and supplementary forces, the overall campaign strength would be 42,000 people. This view was based on the "steady attack, steady advance" strategy. I had always thought that with our army's present level of combat skills and weaponry, we

could only destroy powerful bases using step-by-step fighting. According to reports from Dien Bien Phu, the enemy were going ahead with strengthening their fortifications and the French infantry were traditionally well skilled in defensive tactics. Since the troops were parachuted into Dien Bien Phu, they had had nearly two and a half months to prepare the battleground. The Dien Bien Phu base was an entirely different matter from the one destroyed at Na San the previous year.

As the days passed, I became more and more anxious to get to the battlefield as soon as possible.

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That dry season, the entire country went to war. But never before had the roads to the battlefield been pounded as fiercely as they were during this campaign.

It took a whole night to cross the 30-km-long Pha Din Pass. And to finally reach Dien Bien Phu we still had to pass through fields full of delayed-action mines and bombs.

On the morning of January 12, we arrived at Tuan Giao. We rested by day and moved on at night to reach field command headquarters.

Already we were on the territory of Lai Chau. The provincial capital had been liberated for the first time a month ago. The houses of our Thai countrymen were built on stilts with steeply rising roofs. A water jar and some wooden pots with spring onions growing in them could be seen standing on the bamboo floor in the corner of one of the houses. The hospitable owner prepared tea for his guests. We had a short nap, then woke up and saw Hoang Van Thai from the battlefield H.Q. sitting waiting.

According to reports from officers responsible for campaign preparations, the valley at Dien Bien Phu was fairly large but completely surrounded by high mountains. Our troops were already grouped around the valley. The enemy could no longer pull out without incurring major losses, and were entirely isolated as far as road and airborne communications were concerned. Ten battalions of enemy troops were garrisoned at Dien Bien Phu. They had worked hard building their forts but had only just been able to set up field fortifications. There were vulnerable areas on all sides of the base. On our side, all units were in form and showed a high level of combat readiness. We exchanged views with comrades who were helping with battlefield preparations and who favoured the use of blitzkrieg tactics to annihilate the enemy. The enemy would get a shock when our artillery and anti-aircraft guns went into action. With these tactics, our troops would remain in form, be able to minimise losses, and would not have to cope with the major difficulties that would arise concerning ammunition and food supplies for tens of thousands of fighting men and civilian porters in a long-drawn out fight.

A sketch of the base was spread out on the floor. For the first time I was able to see what an intricate network of positions the enemy had created. From every direction, particularly from the west, in order to close in on the enemy we would have to cross extensive areas of rice fields. To the east of the base in particular were mountains and forests, the way through which was already barred by a series of positions virtually side by side on the hilltops.

"Any more problems to be dealt with?" I asked.

"Work on repairing the road from Tuan Giao to Dien Bien Phu is being speeded up. This road, nearly 100 km long, was previously accessible to horse-drawn carts only and was abandoned a long time ago. When the repair work is finished, artillery pieces will be hauled into position and we can then start firing."

"What are the views of the division commanders?"

"They generally opt for an immediate attack before the enemy has secured a firm foothold."

I sensed that this option would not work and wanted to hear more about the situation. Navarre had no doubt decided to engage in battle at Dien Bien Phu. Our troops still needed time for more road repair work. The enemy were still in a position to bring in reinforcements. Already it was getting more and more difficult to mount a lightning attack and be sure of a quick victory. That difficulty could only increase as time went on.

In the afternoon, we moved on to a command post set up at Milestone 15 on the Dien Bien Phu - Tuan Giao road.

There was a lively atmosphere at the post. Staff officers were busying themselves working out operational strategies using maps and sand tables. Officers who came to meet me said with great emphasis that we would have to race against time in order to launch a lightning offensive and achieve swift victory.

At a meeting of the battlefront Party committee, as Hoang Van Thai had said, members of the advance guard responsible for campaign preparations had been unanimous in their view that it was imperative to attack the enemy right now at a time when they were still unable to bring in more troops and consolidate their defences, so that victory might be attained in just a few days. They estimated that, with the "open a route to victory" spirit currently widespread among our fighting men and civilian porters, artillery pieces could be hauled into position within five days. Everyone was concerned that if the enemy were allowed to boost their troop strength at the base too much, the chance to destroy them this winter and spring would be lost, and that a prolongation of the campaign would hamstring the flow of supplies over the 500 km distance from the rear to the battlefront through rugged terrain frequently raided by enemy aircraft.

I felt there needed to be a meeting with the head of the team of friendly military experts who was also present. Generally speaking, relationships between us and friendly military experts

ever since the Border Campaign had been excellent. Our friends had given us the benefit of their invaluable experience drawn from the revolutionary war in China and the anti-US war in Korea. The team leader was a veteran of revolution, an experienced, wise and mature man. Our exchanges of views were generally frank and sincere. On the eve of his departure to return home he told me that the years he had spent working in Vietnam were a golden period in his revolutionary life. He presented me with a painting showing a phoenix and a pine tree, with the five words "The east wind welcomes victory."

In my view, it was impossible to mount a lightning attack. After a few moments weighing up the pros and cons, the team leader said he had met with the experts who would be joining Vietnamese officers in battlefield preparations. The experts agreed with the Vietnamese officers that it was necessary to launch an early attack in order to be able to win using the "swift attack, swift victory" strategy. If the enemy were left to build up their strength and consolidate their fortifications, in the end there would be little chance of victory.

I still maintained that a swift attack would not pay off, but still did not have enough grounds for rejecting the plan opted for by members of the advance guard. I was not in a position nor was there time to present my case to Uncle Ho and the Politburo. In these circumstances I agreed to convene a conference to provide information on operational strategy.

I told an official in the office of the army's Party Central Committee about my private thoughts and asked him to observe, study and think carefully, and exchange views with me in private on this matter. I instructed the deputy head of Department 2 to carefully study enemy positions on the western plains seen as to be vulnerable to attack from an armoured column. I also requested that reports be issued daily on any new developments.

On January 14, 1954, at Tham Pua⁽¹⁾ cave, the battle orders were made known and explained over a large sand table. All high-ranking officers from divisions participating in the campaign were present – military commanders Vuong Thua Vu, Le Trong Tan, Le Quang Ba, Dao Van Truong and Nam Long, political instructors Tran Do, Chu Huy Man and Pham Ngoc Mau, and so on. Many regimental and battalion leaders became very dear to me through the years of fighting.

The task of making the initial incursion was assigned to Division 308, the first main-force division of the High Command. It would attack the base from the west by way of positions down on the plains and thrust directly through to de Castries' H.Q. Divisions 312 and 316 were assigned the job of launching lightning attacks in an easterly direction where the enemy had key but vulnerable fortifications high up on the hills. The action was planned to last for two days and three nights. In the first place, our entire troop strength should be concentrated on completing the last stage of road construction to enable us to haul artillery pieces into position. While communicating our determination to fight as part of ideological work, I said, "There is still no sign of any major change in the enemy situation. We need to maintain a close watch so as to be able to deal speedily with any eventuality."

Prior to any battle, I used to encourage officers to discuss any difficulties, so as to jointly seek ways of overcoming them. This time, however, all units accepted their assigned tasks with zeal. Some asked for further clarification and none had any doubts. Later on, it came to my knowledge that a number of commanders felt the tasks assigned to their units was too heavy as they would have to make repeated assaults and were anxious about the evacuation of wounded soldiers and about ammunition supplies if the fighting dragged on. In the prevailing atmosphere, however, no-one would express their true feelings.

1. Name of a village near Tuan Giao district, Lai Chau province.

Some writers and journalists from friendly countries had followed our troops to the battle front. One evening, Le Liem⁽¹⁾ suggested that Thai and I meet them before they set out to return home.

The meeting took place by a brook in the moonlight under a parachute, a trophy captured during attacks on Lai Chau.

A Polish writer said, "Nature here is very beautiful. The view is really peaceful."

At that time the guns were silent. In the moonlight, the jagged cliffs seemed almost translucent.

"I too find the scenery here very beautiful," I said. "I rarely write poems but this view is truly poetic. We are about to do battle just to make the whole country as beautiful as it is tonight."

The Czechoslovak journalist said, "How strange your army is! I see no differentiation between generals and the rank and file."

He then recounted that when wading through a stream to get to the command post he had seen the deputy chief of staff offering his horse to a soldier with sore feet and shoes in hand, then wading through the stream as the others were doing.

"Our army is like that. Our relationships are first of all those between comrades and comrades-in-arms."

When the meeting ended, the Polish writer, seemingly unwilling to part with us, anxiously asked, "You are about to fight while we are about to return home. Please let us know what information we will be able to receive later on."

I replied, "You may receive either no news about Dien Bien Phu but news about our successes on other battlefields, or you may be informed of our victory at Dien Bien Phu, and a major victory at that."

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1. Deputy head of the General Political Department at that time.

The field command was transferred from the Km 15 to the Km 62 marker near Na Tau village.

The staff of the command and the battlefront Party committee set about supervising and expediting work on combat preparations.

Most of the gun emplacements I had visited were in exposed terrain, meaning that when the artillery pieces started firing, they would be easily spotted and would become targets of enemy air strikes and artillery bombardment.

The longish roads and tracks along which the artillery was being hauled passed through rugged terrain with almost perpendicular slopes and plunging ravines. I would find it difficult to bring the guns into firing position within the two days permitted. Keeping up ammunition supplies would also be a tough job during the fighting.

The field command mobilized Division 312 and Regiment 57 to bring in the guns. After a week, however, not all the artillery pieces had been moved into position. Our officers and men had under-estimated the strength required to move giant 105 mm. howitzers and A-A guns through thick forest and up steep gradients.

Comrade Cao Pha reported that the enemy were continuing to boost their troop strength. At a number of French strongholds, defensive positions had been well fortified. Each of them were ringed with minefields surrounded by barbed wire traps, some extending for hundreds of metres in length and breadth. Strongholds to the west which Division 308 would have to break through although vulnerable in places, were located in expanses of open field where the enemy could use tanks, artillery and other weapons to counter-attack, while our forces would be unable to find shelter. Comrade Hieu⁽¹⁾ said to me in private, "Ideological work is more about determination to win than about ways of overcoming difficulties in battle."

1. Head of the Office of the Ministry of Defence

Comrade Tran Van Quang reported that on 20 January, Navarre had thrown about 15 battalions into the field to the south of Phu Yen. Our forces in the 5th Interzone continued carrying out the strategy as mapped out earlier, leaving a small group to join the regional armed forces in countering enemy attacks while most units moved towards the north of the western Tay Nguyen. Our military offensive was about to begin.

After many days and nights of hardship we could only inch our artillery pieces forward into position. We were to open fire at 1700 hours on January 25. D-day was fast approaching when a fighter from Division 312 was unfortunately captured by the enemy. The enemy were reported to have extracted and communicated elsewhere information about the timing of our offensive. Such a development had not been anticipated. All units had been deployed and were standing by for the final order. I decided to postpone the attack for another 24 hours and assigned to our officers the task of reassessing the combat-readiness of the various units.

I felt that a great deal of time had passed since the meeting at Tham Pua cave, but in reality only 11 days had gone by.

As each day passed, I became more and more convinced swift attack was impossible. I remembered Uncle Ho's instructions before my departure and a sentence in the resolutions adopted by the Party C.C. at the beginning of 1953: "Our battlefield is narrow and our people few in number, so we will accept only victory, not defeat, as defeat means the exhaustion of our assets."

Through eight years of resistance, our army had matured but our resources were still modest – only six main-force divisions, and most of them were taking part in this campaign.

I stayed awake all through the night of 25 January. I had a headache. A doctor applied some traditional medicine to my forehead.

When hearing Comrade Thai talk for the first time at Tuan Giao about the possibility of a "swift attack, swift victory", I was already thinking that such a choice would be risky. Two weeks had elapsed since then. The enemy situation had changed substantially. Troop strength at the base had increased from 10 to 30 battalions. Defensive installations had been strengthened and were no longer field combat positions. Our army would have to become involved in a major position warfare operation in order to destroy a strongly defended base assisted by on-the-spot air, artillery and armoured attacks and certainly given priority support by the northern Indochina air force. Three obvious difficulties had cropped up. Firstly, our main-force units had so far succeeded only in wiping out at the very most one reinforced battalion with entrenched fortifications as at Nghia Lo⁽¹⁾. In our assault on the Na San base, we only attacked separate enemy battalions in field positions – not a bad performance of course! Secondly, in this battle, we had neither tanks nor aircraft and for the first time there would be substantial co-ordinated action between foot soldiers and heavy weaponry, in which our army had not yet had any training. A regimental commander had recently asked to be able to return a number of weapons because he did not know how to conduct joint operations. Thirdly, our army had so far been accustomed to night combat in terrain offering plenty of shelter. It had no experience in daylight operations on flat terrain against an enemy with air superiority and greater artillery and tank numbers. The battle would take place on a plain measuring 13 km by 6 km. No contingency plans had been drawn up to deal with such difficulties.

I spent a sleepless night, more conscious than ever of my weighty responsibility, and wished that daylight would soon return so that a meeting of the battlefield Party committee could be convened.

1. The old name of a mountainous province in northern Vietnam

On the morning of January 26, 1954, our comrades in the Party committee, down with units to assess the situation, had not all returned. While waiting for the meeting to start, I met the leader of the team of military experts from friendly countries. He was astonished at seeing the dab of wormwood stuck to my forehead. He thoughtfully inquired after my health then said, "the battle is about to begin. Please, General Vo, let us know something about the situation as it stands."

"That is just the issue I would like to discuss with you," I said and went on, "Having studied the situation, I believe the enemy are no longer in a state of provisional defence but have turned their base into a well fortified and well dug-in encampment. It is therefore impossible to attack as was previously planned."

I talked about the three major difficulties facing our army and concluded by saying, "If we attack, failure will be inevitable."

"Then what would be your course of action?"

"It is my intention to postpone the offensive this very evening, regroup to our earlier positions and make new preparations according to a strategy of 'steady attack, steady advance.'"

After a moment's reflection, he said, "I agree with you, General Vo. I will put the matter before the other experts."

"Time is passing. I need to convene a meeting of the Party committee in order to decide the issue. Division 308 has been instructed to move towards Luang Prabang and reveal its strength to some extent, drawing the enemy air force in that direction so as to avoid attack from the air when we pull back our troops and heavy guns."

This exchange of views took just a little over 30 minutes.

When I returned to the command post, all the comrades from the Party committee were already present. I revealed what had long been on my mind about ways of attacking the base and the important changes that had taken place in the enemy situation since the Tham Pua conference. We firmly maintained our determination

to destroy the enemy at Dien Bien Phu but had to devise a new method of attack.

There was a short pause.

Then the head of the Political section said, "Our army has been thoroughly mobilized and everyone is brimming with confidence and determination to fight. If the plan is to be modified, how will we explain it to our men?" The head of the Logistics section added, "In my opinion, it is imperative to maintain our determination. Logistical preparations are already proving difficult. If we don't fight now it will be impossible to fight later on."

I said, "The spirit that exists among our soldiers is a matter of great importance but that determination must have a firm basis. Logistics work is a prerequisite but the right method of attack must be worked out before we make the final decision."

The chief-of-staff said, "Brother Van⁽¹⁾ is right to weigh up the pros and cons. But this time we have superiority in troop numbers and firepower, in addition to benefiting from the experiences of our friends, so I think we have the capacity to win if we attack."

For a while, the meeting remained inconclusive. There was a short break and when the meeting resumed, I said, "We have a very tense situation and need to make a decision very soon. Whatever the circumstances, we must keep to the essential principle, that is, attacking only if certain of victory. Before I left, Uncle Ho set me this task: This battle will be very important, we must attack to win. Attack only when certain of victory. If not certain of victory do not attack."

Very conscious of my responsibility towards Uncle Ho and the Politburo, I asked the comrades to answer the question, "If we attack, can we be 100 per cent sure of victory?"

1. Author's nickname

The head of the Political section said, "Your question is really hard to answer. Who would venture to offer such a guarantee?" The head of the Logistics section added, "How could we offer such a guarantee?"

"I think that in this battle, we must be 100 per cent sure of victory," I said.

Not until now did the chief-of-staff state, "If 100 per cent certainty is a requirement then we have a big problem."

A moment later, the Party committee reached unanimity on the fact that the battle might encounter many difficulties with no concrete measures worked out to overcome them.

I concluded by saying, "Given the essential principle of 'attacking with the certainty of victory', it is imperative that we change our guiding philosophy for wiping out the enemy from 'swift attack, swift victory' to 'steady attack, steady advance'. We will now make the decision to postpone our offensive. Our army on all fronts is now ordered to pull back to regroupment areas and artillery pieces are to be hauled out. Political work must ensure the thorough execution of the order to withdraw just as with the order to attack. Logistics work must switch over to preparations according to the new guideline." I then asked Hoang Van Thai to issue the order to the infantry units. I gave the order to the artillery units and assigned the new task to Division 308.

I telephoned our artillery units to inform them "The enemy situation has changed. Our determination to destroy Tran Dinh (the codename for Dien Bien Phu in this campaign) remains unchanged. Our plan of attack has changed. I therefore order you, as from 1700 hours today, to haul the heavy guns out of position and back to regroupment areas for new preparations. This order must be strictly executed. No explanations can be provided."

From the other end of the line came the voice of Pham Ngoc Mau, political commissar of the artillery forces: "Your order will be strictly executed."

Not until 1430 hours was I able to establish telephone communication with Vuong Thua Vu, commander of Division 308.

"Stand by for the following order: The situation has changed. Your division is to proceed towards Luang Prabang. On the way, if it encounters the enemy, it should attempt to destroy them if practical. The division must conserve its strength and return immediately upon receiving orders to do so. Maintain radio communication. Respond only when requested to."

"Yes!" replied Vu.

"This order is to be strictly executed!"

"What are the orders regarding the use of military forces?"

"You have full authority to make decisions on this, from battalion up to division level. The logistics are for you to resolve. Move out at 0400 hours precisely."

"Your orders will be strictly executed."

At the same time I instructed a small party to move towards Moc Chau, carrying with them a radio set and three times a day communicating reports on the arrival points of Division 308. The secret messages were to include some unencoded words. These messages at first caused the enemy to believe that Division 308 was moving back to the delta plain.

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That day, I made the most difficult decision I had ever had to make in my time as commander-in-chief.

Unable to communicate by radio, I sent an urgent letter reporting my decision to the Politburo.

A few days later I received a letter from Truong Chinh letting me know Uncle Ho and the other comrades were unanimous in their view that the decision to change the guideline was entirely correct. The party Central Committee and Government would mobilize the entire people to make all-out efforts to assist our front line forces until our army won total victory at Dien Bien Phu.

On the Dien Bien Phu battle front, although each individual had different thoughts and anxieties, all the officers and men carried out the order to withdraw to the letter, demonstrating their trust and absolute discipline.

Over seven long days and nights, the entire complement of Division 312 and artillery forces toiled to haul all the guns to safety out along a rugged track in what became a free-fire zone.

The members of Division 308, supplied with half a kilo of rice each, pursued the enemy over a distance of 200 km with the collaboration of Pathet Lao troops and the support of the Lao people, smashed the Nam Hu line of defence and wiped out 14 companies. Navarre again split up his mobile reserves in order to build another base at Muong Sai and strengthen Luang Prabang's defences.

The lunar new year arrived unexpectedly with the traditional white *ban* flowers blooming all over the mountain slopes and along the streams around our headquarters. From southern Vietnam and the 5th Interzone, came messages extending wishes for an early victory to the fighters at Dien Bien Phu. Among the tens of thousands of letters reaching the battlefield were many from Moscow, Peking and Pyongyang. On the eve of the lunar new

year, I checked on the movements of the last artillery pieces on the way back to the regroupment areas. Vuong Thua Vu radioed in, reporting that the first members of Division 308, together with the Pathet Lao army, had already been on the other side of the Mekong River, 7 km from Luang Prabang, imperial city of the Lao King.

The offensive in upper Laos, launched simultaneously with the attack to liberate Kontum⁽¹⁾ following the earlier liberation of Tha Khet province and the Bolovens plateau, along with Navarre's military build-up at Dien Bien Phu, caused mass disintegration of the enemy's mobile reserves.

Division 320, in conjunction with the regional armed forces of various provinces, dominated the northern delta plain, shattered the Day River line of defence and made incursions into various airfields, destroying one-sixth of all enemy aircraft in Indochina. Twenty out of Navarre's 44 battalions of mobile reserves were split up and dispersed to different points in order to protect important communication lines, especially Highway 5.

The enemy's military action against Phu Yen⁽²⁾ was bogged down. Guerrillas in south-central Vietnam carried out raids on Nha Trang⁽³⁾ and the town of Khanh Hoa⁽⁴⁾. The regional armed forces of Quang Nam, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa and Binh Thuan⁽⁵⁾ destroyed many company-strength enemy defence posts. Navarre's dream of pacifying southern Vietnam that dry season went up in smoke. Main-force battalions from the various zones and provinces of southern Vietnam moved into occupied areas, strengthened the people's war of resistance, attacked military posts, intercepted

1. A province in Tay Nguyen in central Vietnam.

2,3,4,5. Names of provinces in central Vietnam.

troop reinforcements, waged mobile warfare, and carried out ambushes on roads, destroying more than 1,000 enemy posts and watch towers (many company-strength positions) and inflicting heavy losses on enemy motorized convoys, military trains and rivercraft. Enemy troops were forced into retreat to defend areas earlier regarded as pacified. The liberated areas of the 9th zone were secured and further extended. Guerrilla bases and zones, large and small, were reoccupied and substantially extended. Many new areas were liberated.

On all fronts the French army was bogged down. But on the Dien Bien Phu battlefield, the decision taken on January 26, 1954 still meant we were facing difficult challenges. Enemy troop strength at Dien Bien Phu had increased to 19 battalions and might increase still further in the course of battle.

With new preparations having to be made in accordance with the new directive, the battle had been postponed one and a half months already.

We built a system of fortifications completely surrounding the base, with hundreds of kilometres of trenches so that our fighters could wage combat both day and night under enemy bombardment. We managed to get the artillery into secure shelters dotted among the surrounding mountains and built roads to enable trucks to transport artillery shells to each gun emplacement.

With the motto "everything for the frontline, everything for victory", our army and people spared no efforts and worked wonders to ensure that ammunition and food supplies get through to our combatants.

The greatest surprise we had in store for the enemy was our refusal to engage in all-out lightning clashes with the entire elite strength of the Expeditionary Corps, firmly dug in in their solidly built forts. We decided to destroy pockets of resistance one by

one and gradually, in our own way, at a time and place of our own choosing, launch attacks with overwhelming superiority in each battle and at the same time consolidate our bunker system and cut the enemy's supply line until the basecamp was strangled.

On March 13, 1954, we opened fire at Dien Bien Phu. The deputy commander of the base, responsible for artillery, killed himself because he could find no way to silence the Vietnamese army's heavy guns. De Castries and the high command of the French Expeditionary Corps watched helplessly as the mightiest points within the basecamp fell in the face of assaults by barefooted Vietnamese shock troops. Our system of trenches ran from the high mountains down to the plains, further sealing the fate of the base with every day that the battle continued.

On May 7, 1954, the "Determination to fight, determination to win" banner was raised over De Castries' bunker. More than ten thousand enemy troops in Muong Thanh waved white flags and surrendered.

That May, our army and people scored a major military success to mark Uncle Ho's birthday. His congratulatory letter arrived the very next day, saying:

"Our army has liberated Dien Bien Phu. The Government and I personally extend congratulations to our officers and men, civilian porters, shock youth brigades and local people on such a magnificent fulfilment of their assigned tasks. Yet while the victory is a great one it is only the beginning..."

I record these reminiscences as a bouquet of fragrant flowers with which to pay tribute to fallen soldiers, and also to document the miraculous power of national unity in battle and of the special Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia alliance which laid the foundations for such a glorious feat-of-arms during that historic spring 35 years ago.

MY MOST PROFOUND MEMORIES

I participate in the symposium "Uncle Ho and His Native Province of Nghe Tinh, the Province of Nghe Tinh and Uncle Ho"⁽¹⁾ with all my most heartfelt sentiments towards him and with my dearest feelings towards the land of Nghe Tinh.

Our symposium is taking place at a time when the world situation is undergoing a complex period of change. The domestic situation is also taking a new direction in the light of the 6th Congress of our Party. We therefore need to pose this question: How are the thoughts of Uncle Ho and our Party illuminating our path of renovation?

Our Uncle Ho is a great man in both Vietnamese and world history. How was he different from other great men in history? I remember that after the death of Karl Marx, Engels, when assessing the work of Marx, arrived at this conclusion: Philosophers up till the time of Marx simply studied and explained the world in different ways, but Marx made a point of the issue that studying the world should be designed in order to transform it. Uncle Ho was such a man. "He was a revolutionary who once changed the course of history"⁽²⁾. He not only found the correct and creative

1. Excerpts from a paper delivered at the symposium "Uncle Ho and His Native Province of Nghe Tinh, the Province of Nghe Tinh and Uncle Ho", 19 Sept., 1989.

2. UNESCO resolution commemorating the centenary of the birth of President Ho Chi Minh.

path to national liberation and played a part in the liberation of other nations of the world, but also devoted his whole life to directly leading the revolutionary cause of our people to achieve victory in our time. He is the leader of our Party and our nation, a remarkably gifted fighter in the world revolutionary movement.

Today, in commemorating the centenary of the birth of Uncle Ho, we all recall the sacred Testament he bequeathed to our people before passing away. The leaders of many countries of the world hold that "the words of President Ho Chi Minh's Testament are destined not only for the Vietnamese people but for all other peoples as well". A non-communist leader has also expressed his emotion, saying that "The Testament of this great man is for the whole of mankind, his work remains unfinished, all of us have the task of continuing it". Such a man is Ho Chi Minh in the eyes of the world. He is indeed the man of the century and perhaps even of our era.

This great human being is one of great simplicity. I knew and admired him right from the time when revolutionary consciousness began to impress on my mind - at the age of 13 or 14. First I was able to see a photo of him and read his works; later, when I joined several revolutionary organizations I again came in contact with many of his writings. My heartfelt admiration for him was boundless. I dreamed of the day when I would be able to meet the famous leader of our country's revolution. Then, in my first meeting with him, what impressed me most deeply was the extraordinary simplicity of this human being. He called me comrade and I called him Brother. Right from the very first minute, the conversation was extremely warm and friendly. His real personality was quite different from the image of the great man I had for so long imagined. He was a simple and great man, the greater his simplicity, the greater he seemed. Afterwards, as I lived and worked in close proximity to him, the impressions of that first meeting became even more firmly etched on my mind.

His first great contribution to the cause of revolution in Vietnam was finding the path to national salvation and opening up the way to liberation for the Vietnamese nation and the oppressed peoples of the world. This issue is discussed in most published works dealing with his life. At this symposium some lively discussions have focused on it. Why did he succeed in finding the path to national salvation while so many of our earlier patriotic scholars failed to do so ?

An eminent son of the Vietnamese nation, Uncle Ho cherished the ideal of independence and liberty for his Homeland. Born into a poor scholar's family, he was profoundly sensitive to the humiliation of a people in a subject nation and the abject misery of the wretched of the earth. To him, saving the country was closely associated with saving the people. He grew up at a time when the " Go East" movement had run into difficulties and with his dynamic forward-looking thought processes, he already said at that time, "The liberation of the nation is a task we must undertake for ourselves. And to overthrow French colonialism, it was vital to know how France was." He opted for a new direction and moved westward.

Immediately upon arriving in France, he discovered that in this very country there were not only colonialist circles but also oppressed and exploited classes. He travelled to many other countries in Africa, the Americas and Europe. He found that it was not only in Vietnam but in all these countries that there were wretchedly poor people. This is why he was so active in movement to liberate oppressed nations and in the working class movement in capitalist countries. It was for just this reason that he was led to Lenin – a natural progression.

Lenin's genius lies in the fact that he put forth the slogan "Proletariat of the world and oppressed peoples, unite !" As a student of Lenin, Uncle Ho was aware that the only correct path to national salvation was that of proletarian revolution. Only by

following the path of Lenin could the emancipation of all peoples be fully realized. Only socialism and communism could entirely liberate nations, the working class and humanity. A citizen of a colonized nation, he became one of the founders of the Communist Party in the "mother country". A strange but splendid thing indeed ! In him, genuine patriotism is inseparable from flawless internationalism. This great Vietnamese patriot became our country's first communist.

With his spirit of total revolution and boundless humanism, he closely associated the cause of national liberation with class and human emancipation. Very early on he realized that mankind was the decisive factor in history. This is why throughout his active life he held humanity in high esteem and whatever the place or circumstance was first and foremost concerned with human beings. "The Pariah" was the first weekly published by him. In an article for issue number one, he made it clear that the purpose of the weekly was the "liberation of mankind". As a leader, he loved and respected his comrades. With the army, he constantly reminded officers to respect the dignity of fighting men. He wrote letters to Death Volunteers of the capital city in words of great respect. In meeting with members of the teaching profession, he recommended that they not beat schoolchildren as they were human beings like the rest of us. He treated old people, youth and children with affection, regarding all of them as human beings like himself. It was for precisely this reason that the image and thoughts of Uncle Ho became part of everyone's heart, not only in Vietnam but across all five continents, irrespective of nationality, skin colour or culture. I believe that in the world there have been very few leaders who visited many countries and took part in the revolutionary movement in different continents as did Uncle Ho. In this symposium, you have touched upon the quintessence of the cultural influences he assimilated. He absorbed the spiritual values of every world culture but the overriding ones remained those of his own nation. He hoped that each and every Viet-

namese would be able to do likewise. Such people once emancipated and allowed to develop in all respects, would become a mighty force and build a civilized and contented society for both their own nation and all nations of the world.

Once the objective had been defined as national independence and socialism, it was vital to resolutely stick to it and achieve it totally. "When making the revolution, we must make it to the end." He used ordinary words such as these. In the two wars of resistance, he time and again asserted, "While a single aggressor still remains on our territory we must fight on to sweep him away." On this point, I remember the days at Tan Trao when Uncle Ho was seriously ill with a high fever and we were greatly worried. He lay unconscious for a time but when he came to, he called me in and said, "Even if we have to burn down the whole of the Truong Son Range, this time we must be able to secure our independence."

After the triumph of the August Revolution, the situation was extremely complex. Uncle Ho and the Party C.C. agreed to sign the Preliminary Agreement (of March 6th). Afterwards he went to France. Before setting out he advised Huynh Thuc Khang, Truong Chinh and I as follows: "In this complex situation you must remember: for the immediate present be flexible. It must be understood that national independence and national sovereignty are immutable; this is the principle and this is the strategy. On the basis of this principle and immutability, the tactics to be used to cope with the situation must depend on the particular circumstances."

Throughout my life I have borne in mind his advice, which comes to me each time I encounter difficulties. How profound it is! Later, during the anti-US war of resistance, he declared, "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom". These words and this idea motivated and organized the entire nation to take up the fight and pursue the cause of revolution to victory throughout the country. In the Testament he left behind, his "overwhelming desire" was precisely that ideal, objective and line of the Vietnamese revolution.

He said, "Any movement has its ups and downs. If we are able to achieve a body of dedicated cadres, both communist and non-communist, the strength of the movement will increase. When difficulties occur or the movement declines it will still remain steady. Great attention must therefore be paid to the problem of cadres, especially young people, both male and female." I did so and have continued to do so ever since.

I selected the most ardent of the young men and women to organise into militia units and self-defence corps. The day it was decided to found the liberation army, the most resolute, courageous and qualified cadres were nominated to become "generals" - at that time platoon and squad leaders. I joined Uncle Ho in choosing each of them after careful consideration, first of all those who had undergone practical training. Uncle Ho said "Whether successful or not, those with experience will make good cadres". They had become "Soldiers of Uncle Ho". From the caption "Emancipation of mankind" in "The Pariah" to his idea that "with the people's support we have everything," to him the human strategy was number one.

Uncle Ho was a strategist of genius for the Vietnamese revolution. The adoption of a line must be coupled with the correct strategies and policies, common strategies and policies and for each period; and again these must be specific plans and measures for implementation. When I was working in the Politburo, he used to say, "When enacting a major policy, the leader must have broad vision". He was a man who could look back into the past and forward to the future of the nation and of mankind. He had great vision, something that was easily understandable from his globe trotting and active part in activities in many parts of the world. He was a man of historic decisions taken at important turning points in history. Together with the C.C. he decided to launch the armed insurrection, leading the August Revolution to triumph, to wage a nationwide war of resistance, and lead the anti-French resistance to victory; to fight US aggression and lead the cause of national liberation and reunification to complete victory. At such

moments in history, he showed himself to be utterly resolute. The resolutions arrived at by himself and the C.C. were the outcome of a long process of discussion and deliberation. As well as formal meetings of the Politburo, many a time he stayed on with Politburo members, drinking tea and talking to make what is known as "tour d'horizon" together, seeing if there was anything new or what new problems might have arisen. In these meetings among close friends, each of us would talk about this or that. It was during these very talks that we would work through important issues such as mistakes made regarding land reform, and after exchanging views proposing ways of conducting investigations, such matters would be brought up before a formal meeting of the Politburo for resolution. If leadership is about preconceived ideas and foresight and overseeing subsequent implementation, then the issue must be about having to have foresight, and accurate foresight. Seen from this angle, as I still remember, these meetings often produced substantial results and at the same time helped a collective work ethic.

Uncle Ho said, "Policy: one, measures: 10-20". He was a great organizer. I have mentioned the specific details involved in organizing the Vietnam People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation following the decision to establish the first main-force army. Later on, with regard to each major task, each major military campaign, his requirements regarding strategies, measures and checks were extremely exacting, whether the issues involved were major ones or minor. I can recall that when we were still at Pac Bo we resolved to send a secret letter to a base at Phan Thiet in order to establish contact. Uncle Ho assigned me the task of writing it on a piece of cigarette paper. The address and the contents were clearly legible and I was pleased with myself regarding the style and hand-writing. After eating, on his instructions we revised the letter together. He added a few words to make the address clearer then rolled up the letter again and had it sent. I learned to follow myself this meticulous way of operating in my working life. As a result, to this day when I work

with my secretaries, the latter often note that I am extremely meticulous and that everything is to be carefully checked.

I have talked about his style of collective and democratic leadership. At all times, he listened to the aspirations of the masses and the views expressed by cadres. With him, anyone could express any idea without reservation. Being with him, either at private meetings or formal meetings of the Politburo, we quite naturally felt encouraged enough to speak, even about views that differed from his way of thinking. All of you may still remember that in his letter to the people of Nghe Tinh, he always referred to the question of democracy, furthermore that of having to broaden democracy.

What stood out about him was the fact that theory went hand in hand with the practical. It was precisely through practical experience that he discovered the new, revolutionary and creative. We must always look for the new, he would say to us; by studying the new, advocating and implementing it we could do anything. Soon after the triumph of the revolution, he wrote the book "New Life". In the early years of the resistance, he wrote the book "Improving one's way of working". He wanted to renovate the style of the party leadership, the way of thinking and working of Party members, and the life of the society. These days we are carrying out this work of renovation in accordance with the resolutions of the 6th Party Congress, thus continuing to develop his ideas about respect for the new.

With him words had to match deeds. My style of writing comes from this. The written word must be brief and concise, easily understood, written so that people read, understand and act. From "A Summary of Tactics" concerning the founding of the Party and "Instructions on the setting up of the Vietnam People's Propaganda Unit for National Liberation" to the "Call for Nationwide Resistance", or the slogan "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom", the verse in Tet greetings "March forward! Total victory will surely be ours" and simple utterances such as the truth that "We do not fear shortages, only injustice.

We do not fear poverty, only disquietude in the people's hearts". His words penetrated into everyone's mind and heart and became a source of strength. You all know this simple story: when reading the Declaration of Independence, he paused and asked "Fellow countrymen! Can you hear me clearly?" Naturally everyone was deeply moved and felt very close to their leader at his first public appearance. When at Pac Bo, we published the paper "Independent Vietnam", he asked me to write an article about women. I wrote two pages, fairly detailed, and believed it was a good article. He read it and said, "Too long, too many difficult words; few people here would read it and if they did they would not understand..." Following his advice, I wrote another article 200 words in length, polishing up every sentence and every word to make it easily understandable. Then I read it out for the office staff to hear, all the listeners understood and the article was approved.

Later, Uncle Ho put to me a good idea which I still have not carried through and which is still in my notebook. He said, "You have written several books about people's war and the people's army which is good. Now think how to write a book, further abridged, about people's war, introducing the main things that must be done, a book which youth, women, old men and women and small children will enjoy reading and can understand." I still remember his suggestion but still view writing such a book as being no easy task.

Unity and unification constituted one of his major ideals: unity of the entire Party, unity of the entire people and international solidarity. He attached much importance to unity for the reason that unity was strength. It was no accident that at the end of many meetings he used to beat time for everyone to sing the song "Unity is strength".

National independence could be won only through independence and reunification. In his thoughts, national independence was never dissociated from national reunification. Since the days when the Vietnamese people of the south had stood up

to resist aggression especially after our country was cut in two, night and day he turned his thoughts to the south which had been "the first to fight and the last to arrive". In August 1969 when his condition became very grave, one afternoon he sent for me to hear my report on the war situation in the south and that on each battlefield. That was the last time he ever heard a report.

Unity in the Party and international solidarity on a fair and reasonable bases is the tradition of our Party. All of you know that Uncle Ho did everything he could to restore unity among the fraternal parties. Comrade Andropov later said, "President Ho Chi Minh's policy of unity is absolutely correct; he has said he is prepared to do anything possible to help restore Sino-Soviet unity". The great thing was that, thanks to the spirit of international solidarity upheld by him and our Party, throughout our anti-US war of resistance, even though relationships between the Soviet Union and China were unsatisfactory, both fraternal countries united with us and gave total support to our people's resistance. Unity is vital but must be realised "on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism in a fair and reasonable manner". Reason should come first and then fairness. That is a matter of principle. This issue is still one of burning importance today.

He placed great emphasis on the revolutionary virtues of Party members who had to set an example for the masses. He himself was the first to do so. At this point, I remember a story about a conference of cadres regarding the old northwest military campaign. Uncle Ho promised to attend the conference but that day there was torrential rain. I suggested to him that he come the next day when the deluge eased. He said, "I have an appointment with the cadres, our cadres have managed to cross the torrent and I can do likewise". A rope was thrown across the stream. He stumbled along it to reach the other side. He was lashed by the

torrent and soaked to the skin. At the conference that day, our cadres made few comments but all were deeply moved. When difficulties emerged in the plans being discussed, everyone proposed daring initiatives to overcome them. I would like to recall here Uncle Ho's intention to go to the southern battlefields himself in order to visit his fellow-countrymen and fighters while the war was raging. When speaking of the Party and of his virtues, we have touched on an important issue and a major lesson of both historical and topical significance.

You wish me to talk even more about my profound memories of Uncle Ho. There can be no end to such reminiscences. His whole life was a bright example for us to follow. In this meeting hall, we can read the slogan "To live, fight, work and learn following the example of the Great Uncle Ho!" Each one of us should endeavour to make this slogan a reality: Serving the people and the Fatherland with all one's heart; in the most complex situations, holding fast to the ideals and objectives "National independence and socialism", "Coping with change with flexibility", "Placing public interest above anything else", "Greater public spiritedness", devoting one's whole life to the cause of renovation in our nation.

THE WORLD KEEPS ON CHANGING, BUT THE THOUGHTS OF HO CHI MINH WILL LIVE FOR EVER ⁽¹⁾

It is with the greatest emotion that, on behalf of the Vietnamese Government and people and Vietnamese scientists, I would like to express here, at this solemn forum, most profound and sincere gratitude to the Indian Government and people, and the Government and people of West Bengal, His Excellency the Mayor and the population of Calcutta for their energetic and unceasing activity over the past year or so, which, under the guidance of the National Council headed by the Indian Prime Minister, aims to solemnly commemorate the centenary of the birth of President Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's hero of national liberation and outstanding person of culture.

On this occasion, I would like to extend my warmest greetings to the scholars and learned people of India and other countries who over many years have devoted themselves to conducting research on President Ho Chi Minh. Their in-depth studies, which are the fruits of scientific work, have contributed to affirming and widely disseminating the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh, a noble task that has given a boost to cultural interchange among nations, for the sake of humanity, peace and social progress in our time.

I would like also to express here my most sincere thanks for the thoughtful reception and warm hospitality the leaders and

1. Speech delivered at the International Symposium on President Ho Chi Minh, held in Calcutta, India, January 1991.

population of Calcutta have given to me and to Vietnamese scientists here.

I should think that the choice of Calcutta by the Indian Government and people as a venue for this solemn international Symposium is of great importance. In his lifetime, President Ho Chi Minh twice set foot in our historic and heroic city.

Calcutta is the native city of Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet and philosopher and celebrated Indian social activist. Calcutta is also the city which, as early as 1946 and before India won back its independence, took the lead in the movement for solidarity with and support for the Vietnamese people's valiant and indomitable war of resistance for national independence and reunification.

Essence of the Thoughts of Ho Chi Minh

This international Symposium, together with the erection of a statue of President Ho Chi Minh, constitutes a major event which adds to the richness of the fine annals of friendship between Vietnam and India.

Like other symposiums on President Ho Chi Minh, held on the recommendation of UNESCO to its member countries, this one takes place against an international background of upheaval. Many major changes have occurred, many new concepts emerged and many old values re-examined. However, as far as President Ho Chi Minh is concerned, scientists belonging to different countries and affiliations have, through these symposiums, come to a common assessment: the world has changed and will continue to change, but the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh will live for ever in the cultural treasury of mankind.

So what has made the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh exist for ever for mankind? One cannot clearly explain the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh if one fails to place Ho Chi Minh in his relationship with

his time. President Ho Chi Minh was born and grew up at a time when colonial occupation by the forces of capitalism had been completed. Hundreds of independent and sovereign nations had lost their independence and become enslaved. Inheriting the nation's tradition of undaunted struggle and craving for national liberation, Ho Chi Minh made up his mind to leave his country in search of the road to national salvation. After nearly ten years of surveying the imperialist powers and their colonial system, he came to this conclusion: "Everywhere capitalism and imperialism are cruel and ruthless; everywhere the working people are exploited, tortured and have no right to life".

Imbued with a profound love for his country and people, and with his deep sympathy for the plight of millions of wretched people, Nguyen Ai Quoc turned to Leninism in 1920. The road to national salvation is that of proletarian revolution. Patriotism is closely linked with genuine internationalism. National independence is linked with the liberation of society, of mankind. That is the essence of the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh.

Over the subsequent decades of study and struggle the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh were gradually perfected.

The thoughts of Ho Chi Minh embody the imaginative and successful application of the principles of Marxism-Leninism to the specific realities of Vietnamese society, of Eastern societies which used to be colonial and semi-feudal. This body of thought blazed a path to national liberation for colonial and semi-colonial countries, and set directions for those societies to advance from national-liberation revolution and people's national democratic revolution to socialism.

Many revolutionaries of the time in Europe held that only when proletarian revolution in the mother country succeeded could the liberation of colonized countries be achieved. But Nguyen Ai Quoc realized that the cause of national liberation for

colonized countries might be based mainly on its own strength to achieve victory; more than that victory could be won earlier and would greatly aid the revolutionary cause in the mother country as well.

Apart from its main sources, namely French utopian socialism, English political economy, German philosophy and Marxist dialectics, Marxism was enriched by Ho Chi Minh who introduced new elements: the patriotism of the Vietnamese people, the desire of oppressed peoples for national liberation, the collective tradition and the quintessence of oriental philosophy. Dialectics have also been applied with imagination on the basis of inheriting and developing the dialectical elements in the thinking of the Vietnamese nation and Asia's time-honoured civilizations.

If the goal of Marxism is not only to comprehend the world but also to transform it, then Ho Chi Minh is a vivid personification of that goal. In Ho Chi Minh, theory and practice are one, word and deed are one. As one scholar has said, "Ho Chi Minh's thoughts and works cannot be evaluated only through his writing and words, but also through his actions, and what is more, through his work, studies and struggle, and his flawless, simple and noble life".

The thoughts of Ho Chi Minh constitute a new development of Marxism-Leninism in its application to the practice of the cause of national liberation and building a new society in Vietnam, and can therefore contribute to the development of Eastern countries and, furthermore, to other countries as well.

As far as Vietnam is concerned, Ho Chi Minh's thoughts not only took the struggle for national liberation to complete victory, through thirty years of fighting without respite. But today, under the leadership of the Communist Party, it also continues to develop with imagination in order to find the road of transition to socialism, the road of renewal towards building a peaceful, civilized and happy life for the entire people of Vietnam, for every Vietnamese citizen.

National Independence

First of all, I would like to deal with the question of national independence in the thoughts of President Ho Chi Minh.

Mankind, throughout its historical evolution, has engendered so many civilizations, and more than a few shameful things. Colonialism is one of the most shameful things suffered by mankind. It has burdened the destiny of small, weak nations with fetters and oppression, famine and poverty, illiteracy and disease. Winning back independence and freedom is therefore the burning desire of the exploited nations in the 20th century. And Ho Chi Minh was one of those who symbolized that burning aspiration. Ho Chi Minh uttered the celebrated watchword: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." He was regarded as the vanguard fighter in inspiring his nation and other exploited nations to rise up to fight for freedom, independence, and human values.

In the process of leading the national liberation struggle as well as in the process of leading the Vietnamese revolution, President Ho Chi Minh valued highly the strength of the people and the nation, and regarded them as decisive forces in the victory of the revolution. His strategy consisted of uniting the entire nation and people in the common struggle for national independence and freedom. He said:

"Unity is strength."

"Unity, unity, great unity"

Success, success, great success!"

The Vietnamese national community has over fifty ethnic groups which the enemy constantly tried to "divide and rule". President Ho Chi Minh appealed to all ethnic groups to unite and consider themselves brothers in the same family.

Vietnamese society consists of many classes with different interests, but all shared the same fate of being enslaved by

colonialism. President Ho Chi Minh appealed to all classes, all strata – workers, peasants, intellectuals, patriots and overseas Vietnamese – to close ranks in the fight to save the nation and their families, and to resolve all problems arising from the relationship between classes and the nation.

People of many different religions and beliefs live on Vietnamese soil. The enemy always tried to incite and divide them. This is why President Ho Chi Minh mapped out a policy of uniting the different religions and uniting believers and non believers, in order to join forces to fight the aggressors and develop the country.

President Ho Chi Minh set great store on unity between the Vietnamese people and fraternal peoples and progressive forces throughout the world, including the French and American peoples. He found a correct solution to problems arising from the relationship between Vietnam and other countries, between the Vietnamese nation and others.

The United National Front, which rallied everyone into a single block, is regarded as a tremendous force, not only in the national-liberation revolution but also in the socialist revolution.

It is on the basis of that solid and broad national unity that the entire Vietnamese people, regardless of age and sex, from the mountain areas to the plains, rose up as one man to put up a fight, thus creating the invincible force of the Vietnamese people's war which defeated every aggressor.

It is on the basis of that international solidarity that the strength of the Vietnamese people was multiplied, creating the total strength that led the two wars of resistance to complete victory.

The thoughts of Ho Chi Minh and the example set by Vietnam have become a source of inspiration and a guiding light for all

peoples in the struggle for national liberation. Many independent countries have acknowledged the impact, direct and indirect, of the Vietnamese revolution and Ho Chi Minh's thoughts.

Today, the ideal "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" had retained its vitality. Having gained political independence, developing countries still have to struggle against all neo-colonialist forces which are making use of their financial, technical, and technological power to plunder them and keep them in a state of backwardness and dependence; in other words, they are, in fact, carrying out "re-colonization".

At a time of the revival of nationalism from Asia to Europe, one is deeply moved by the following verses by Ho Chi Minh:

*"There are thousands of bitter things in the world
But no bitterness can compare with the loss of freedom."*

In short, freedom for everybody, every nation and every State in the choice of their path to development – that is the eternal aspiration of mankind. That is also the essence of the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh.

A New Order

For President Ho Chi Minh, national independence is always linked to the people's freedom and happiness. He said, "The country may be independent, but if the people do not enjoy their freedom and happiness, that independence has no meaning". He also said, "I have only one desire, the strongest desire, that is, to see to it that our country is fully independent and that all our compatriots are well-fed, well-dressed and have the opportunity to learn". This recalls Mahatma Gandhi, who also said that he would strive for an India where there would be no nobles and no pariahs, an India where all communities would live in harmony.

Ever since the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, President Ho Chi Minh had set forth three major and pressing

tasks: "to wipe out famine, eliminate ignorance and expel foreign invaders". He put forward the slogan: "To carry out simultaneously resistance and national development". He devoted great attention to efforts to painstakingly build up a new society and a new existence, he called on the people to do everything possible "to increase production and practise thrift", to develop the economy and culture, to organize general elections, draw up a new Constitution and set up the State of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a people's State, by the people and for the people.

Ho Chi Minh discovered the values of independence, freedom and happiness in the objectives and ideals of scientific socialism – of Marxism-Leninism. For President Ho Chi Minh, socialism was not a set of rigid dogmas, alien to the material and intellectual interests of human beings. He set a very specific and practical objective for the period of transition from the people's democracy to socialism: "To make everybody well-fed, well-dressed, happy and free", "to liberate the working people from poverty, to provide everybody with employment, welfare and a happy life". This objective is indicative of the consistent nature of Ho Chi Minh's thoughts with regard to people's democratic revolution as well as in socialist revolution – always giving priority consideration to the interests of the country and people. One can call this socialism a socialism that makes the people rich and the country strong – a kind of socialism in accordance with the nation's characteristics and the common path of mankind.

In the process of leading Vietnam's revolution and in his creative search for a road to progress for the country, President Ho Chi Minh highlighted the main aspects of the new society:

– *In the economy*: to gradually develop the infrastructure of socialism, to provide everybody with employment; to institute a democratic management and distribution system in accordance with work done, to continuously boost labour productivity and raise people's material and intellectual living standards; to advance to the end of a system of exploitation of people by people.

– *In politics*: to set up an order where the working people are masters, taking the alliance between workers, peasants and intellectuals as the basis; to establish a people's State, for the people and by the people, where all power belongs to the people and the people are the masters while the government and officials are only public servants, etc.

– *In cultural and social affairs*: to bring into being a just and democratic society, where humans are friends and brothers to one another, a society endowed with fine traditions and customs, where traditional values are given prominence in combination with a selective acceptance of the cultural quintessence of the rest of mankind; where science and technology are developed, the people's cultural standard is raised, talented people are trained and used effectively, and the new man is given the right conditions to gradually come into being and to develop his existing creativity.

According to President Ho Chi Minh, socialism in Vietnam does not evolve along a path of natural historical development, from capitalism to socialism, as Karl Marx said, but from a backward agricultural economy with an under-developed production capacity to socialism. This advance is still full of hardships and will be of long duration, and one cannot achieve a high material standard of living overnight; however, right now there should be a struggle to build up a democratic and just society, with a healthy lifestyle and good relationship between men.

In short, President Ho Chi Minh's concept of socialism is the creative application of Marxism-Leninism combined with the collective cultural traditions of the Vietnamese nation and the aspiration for justice and brotherhood in traditional Eastern philosophy. Therefore, other nations, while refusing to embark on the tormentous road of capitalism, may study and find in Ho Chi Minh's socialist ideals directions appropriate to their chosen path.

Ho Chi Minh's Humanism

For President Ho Chi Minh, national and social liberation should eventually lead to the *liberation of man* from all kinds of oppression, exploitation and injustice. This ideal springs from his boundless humanity and love for the people and mankind.

Ho Chi Minh's humanity is first of all directed to his suffering and persecuted compatriots, but his love and affection knew no limits in terms of race or skin colour. Ho Chi Minh's humanity, however, is by no means compassion. His love for man is closely linked to his boundless trust in man's creative energy and common sense, and his constant efforts to awaken the potential abilities of man to consciously arise and fight for his own emancipation, wrest back independence and freedom for the nation and dignity for himself.

Ho Chi Minh's humanity is full of optimism for man and of trust in man's fine nature and possibilities for progress, even though he may have once committed errors. He said that we should use tolerance and generosity towards children that have been led astray through circumstances. The duty of a revolutionary is to see to it that "the noble characteristics of every human being blossom like flowers in spring while the ugly ones gradually wither away".

In the work of socialist construction, President Ho Chi Minh paid special attention to developing "the new man", for this is the driving force behind the future advance of Vietnamese society. He demanded that there be a strategy "to cultivate human beings". The new man should be both the cause and the result of the process of struggle to build a new society. According to him, the new socialist Vietnamese man should have the spirit of being master of the society. "If you are the masters, you must know how to shoulder your responsibilities and not rely on others or simply wait" he said. The new man should have cultural and scientific

knowledge and some professional training. The new man should possess revolutionary virtues: "industriousness, thrift, integrity and righteousness", "devotion to the public interest and selflessness". He should oppose individualism, but opposing individualism does not mean negating the legitimate interests of the individual. He also said, "Everyone has his own character, his own strong points and his own life and the life of his family. If personal interests do not clash with collective interests, that is not bad." In his opinion, the new Vietnamese man is a man imbued with national traditions and with socialist internationalism. Ho Chi Minh is the symbol of noble values in human relationships: veneration for the elderly, affection for children and young people, and respect for women. He did not miss anyone in the attention he paid to other people, he made sacrifices for all of them, and was not concerned with fame and advantage for himself. In his lifetime, he led a humble, simple, pure and upright, and refined lifestyle.

Ho Chi Minh's humanity is the crystallization of traditional Vietnamese values and at the same time the product of mankind's quintessence. It can be said that Ho Chi Minh's humanity is humanity of a new era.

Facing a New World Situation

The world today is at psychological turning point, the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru once said. He said that what was needed now is progress towards peace, friendship and brotherhood, and he affirmed that Dr Ho Chi Minh was the embodiment of such progress. This assessment of Ho Chi Minh by Nehru is still relevant today.

President Ho Chi Minh was a man of boundless love and friendship. More than anyone, he was committed to peace – a peace linked to independence and national integrity. Steadfast in strategy, he proved to be extremely flexible in tactics, and many times tried to make concessions, sometimes important ones, to preserve peace for his nation. But the greater the concessions he

made, the more the enemy took advantage of them. When there was no other alternative, he was compelled to mobilize all the Vietnamese people to undertake to the end the longest and most arduous war in their history in order to wrest back independence and unity for their country. This was a war for legitimate peace fought by the Vietnamese nation. This also was a typical example of the dialectical relationship between war and peace.

Only recently have we had the peace that the President dreamed of all his life. We are doing our best to fulfil his last wish, that is, to develop a peaceful, united, independent, democratic, strong and prosperous Vietnam in favourable new conditions, but also in the face of immense difficulties. These difficulties arise from our backward economy and many decades of war, to which should be added economic blockade and embargo by imperialist forces, the influence of the changes in Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union and a very complex world situation.

These days, while we are holding this Symposium in India, a land of peace and friendship, we are also witnessing the continuation of the profound changes in the international situation with the emergence of a multi-polar situation, detente between the great powers, particularly the transformation of the struggle from the political-military to political-economic arena. Meanwhile in the USSR as well as in Eastern European countries, a serious and multi-faceted crisis is occurring, leading to an imbalance in strength. Although peace and co-operation are tending to develop favourably, the struggle between opposing forces is by no means less intense and the danger of war has yet not been ruled out. Nobody can predict what is going to happen in the Persian Gulf tomorrow and beyond.

At this juncture, at the same time as the rapid growth in the technological revolution there is a widening of the gap between developed and developing countries. With their subtle ruses, the

developed countries have been taking advantage of their technological, commercial and financial strength and the world's most powerful mass media to control the political situation, infiltrate poor countries by economic, cultural and ideological means with a view to creating an ever-widening inequality in the North-South relationship, heaping on to the shoulders of developing countries an enormous debt burden, and preventing the building of a new equal world economic order that India, together with others, proposed a long time ago.

As a member of the world community, Vietnam has been trying to make her contribution to creating peace and stability in the region and throughout the world, promoting international exchanges, normalizing and promoting relationships, taking part in work distribution and co-operating with other countries with different political systems, enlisting support from them in many fields – economic, managerial, scientific and technical. Meanwhile the Vietnamese people are building up their self-reliance and independent creativity, and overcoming difficulties and obstacles in order to take them through massive problems of our time.

In order to solve these problems we continue to follow the goals of our revolution – the national independence, and socialism that our late President aimed for. The Vietnamese people are stepping up a multi-faceted process of renovation across the country. We understand all the more clearly the statement of President Ho Chi Minh: "This is a grim struggle against what is old-fashioned and useless, in order to create what is new and full of vitality; this struggle cannot come to a successful conclusion without relying on the strength of the entire people." This cause of renovation has achieved significant initial results. Our Party is carrying out a policy of broadening democracy, encouraging the whole nation to take part in the platform and strategy for development of the economy and society to be presented at the coming 7th Party Congress.

We believe that in the context of the present world situation the Vietnamese people, as well as the peoples of other countries, while promoting international co-operation and applying the cultural and scientific achievements of civilization and of our creative minds, are all the more affirming their national rights, and preserving the identity and fine traditions of their nation. The desire for independence, freedom and real happiness for each nation is a condition for unity among the nations of the world.

In this spirit we expect from this forum commemorating the centenary of the birth of President Ho Chi Minh that all those who value peace and justice and strive for real independence, democracy and freedom, for social equality and progress, should promote solidarity, increase mutual understanding and assistance and join in efforts for a *new world order in which equality must be implemented in all respects* – political, economic, cultural, social, industrial, in information and so on for peace, happiness and a bright future for mankind.

Ho Chi Minh, a hero of the Vietnamese people, a loyal friend of all nations and progressive people all over the world, was a thinker, a sage, a social activist whose theories always matched reality. The thoughts of Ho Chi Minh form a set of tenets that can be summarized as follows – independence and reunification for the homeland, freedom and democracy for the people, equality and happiness for everyone, peace and friendship for every nation and the development of cultural and humanistic relationships in our time.

This scientific Symposium held in Calcutta represents a new advance in the study of the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh. In this work, Indian scholars will make a significant contribution. President Ho Chi Minh set great store by India. "India is a powerful independent country", he said, "which has made a valuable contribution to peace in Asia and has been playing an important role in the international arena. She has, moreover, made valuable

efforts for the achievement of peace in Vietnam. The basis and traditions of Indian philosophy lie in the ideals of peace and fraternity. For centuries, Buddhist ideology, the arts and the science of India have spread throughout the world."⁽¹⁾

Once again, we would like to say that in the Eastern origins of the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh there are beliefs stemming from the philosophy of your country. Between Vietnam and India there are many similarities in terms of history and culture. We both have a common goal, and a tradition of solidarity and mutual assistance both in the past and now for the sake of peace, security and co-operation in the regions of Southeast Asia and Southern Asia, in Asia, in the Pacific region and in other areas throughout the world. Following the path illuminated by the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh the Vietnamese people will for ever treasure and promote warm friendship between the two countries, the foundations of which were laid by the late President Ho Chi Minh and the late Prime Minister P.J. Nehru, the great sons of the two nations, and two great men of culture.

May the friendship and co-operation between Vietnam and India stay vibrant and last for ever.

May our Symposium achieve fruitful results.

Once again, thank you all for listening.

1. Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works* (in Vietnamese), Vol. 8, pp 38 and 47.

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