

## BOOK REVIEWS

*PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam.* By Douglas Pike. Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1986. 384pp.

As Douglas Pike points out in his preface, the previous absence of book-length studies on the Vietnamese communist armed forces is surprising, given the prominent place that the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) has occupied in Southeast Asia's recent history. Having defeated the will (if not the armed forces) of both France and the United States in their struggles to control the destiny of Indochina, the PAVN went on to subjugate Cambodia while simultaneously defending Vietnam against its erstwhile ally, China. In 1987, the PAVN comprised more than a million regular personnel, making it the fifth (though not the third, as claimed by Pike) largest military force in the world. Several non-communist Southeast Asian governments claim that Vietnam's apparent military might poses a serious threat to their countries' security.

The strength of Pike's study lies in his masterful discussion of the position of the PAVN in relation to the wider Vietnamese communist movement and Vietnamese society as a whole, both historically and more recently. As Pike continually emphasizes, perhaps the PAVN's single most important feature is "the integrated, symbiotic relation of military to Party", in both war and peace. Two of the most impressive and convincing chapters are those concerned with *dau tranh*, the Vietnamese communists' mutant version of their Chinese comrades' ideas about how to fight a guerrilla war. *Dau tranh* was a "seamless web" of political and (increasingly as the Vietnam War continued) armed struggle. The political struggle was not restricted to Vietnam: it was taken to the United States' home territory where it turned "the weight of the enemy's philosophical system against him". Pike's most important conclusion regarding *dau tranh* is that the anti-communist side in the Vietnam War failed to develop an effective counter-strategy: for the South Vietnamese and their allies "it was possible to lose the war by losing battles, but winning the battles did not mean victory".

Pike's three chapters on "Party, Ideology and Leadership" are also excellent. Despite the close relations between Party and Army, there are conflicts — especially concerning the extent to which the armed forces should be used for economic and other non-military tasks and the "red versus expert" conundrum. Pike points out that the "experts" are probably still a minority amongst the officer corps, and that the PAVN's consequent technological and doctrinal weakness has become increasingly significant since Hanoi's armed forces have become involved in counter-insurgency in Cambodia and the defence of the northern border against China. The Cambodian experience, in particular, has revealed "serious shortcomings": the PAVN now finds itself on the receiving end of *dau tranh*.

In his concluding chapter, "PAVN and the Future", Pike makes two worthwhile points. Firstly, the PAVN's military prowess should not be exaggerated: "with the exception of Thailand, Vietnam does not represent a significant direct threat to its neighbours". Secondly, Pike points to the "anachronistic" nature of the Vietnamese communists' political

and military system, which has been challenged by both “southern” influences and the relative socio-economic success of non-communist Southeast Asia. In his view, this system lives on borrowed time, and is in danger of falling prey to the “Polish syndrome” involving the imposition of military-dominated “Marxist fascism”. However, Pike was writing in 1983 and much has changed in Hanoi since then. While his first conclusion remains valid (perhaps more so than ever, given Hanoi’s apparent determination to withdraw most of its troops from Cambodia by 1990), the second obviously needs to be re-evaluated in the light of the vigorous attempts to “renovate” Vietnam’s economic and political system since the sixth party congress in December 1986.

Douglas Pike was extraordinarily well-equipped to write a standard work on the PAVN, having followed its fortunes over a quarter of a century and with Berkeley’s incomparably comprehensive Indochina Archive at his fingertips. But although Pike has undoubtedly succeeded in his attempt to produce “a straightforward explanation of the PAVN’s place and role in terms of Vietnamese national philosophy and governmental behavior”, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* is not without flaws.

Pike argues that the PAVN’s crucial strength during the Vietnam War was its ability to use its own superlative skill in organization to exploit the other side’s organizational weakness. The PAVN also seems to have got the better of Douglas Pike in a rather similar manner. Somehow, the constituent chapters of *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* fail to mesh together to form a satisfactorily cohesive whole. For example, the central doctrinal concept of *dau tranh* is introduced almost at the very beginning (p. 17), but the meaning and significance of the term are not explained until Chapter 9 (p. 213 *et seq.*). More importantly, Chapters 3, 4, and 5, replete with details of the PAVN’s contemporary operations, command structure, order of battle and auxiliary forces come as a shock immediately after two historical, introductory chapters: they might have been better positioned after the more important sections on “Party, Ideology and Leadership” and “Strategy”.

A second problem is Pike’s sometimes unsatisfactory handling of the more strictly military aspects of the PAVN. In particular, Chapters 4 and 5 (on “The High Command Structure” and “Paramilitary Forces” respectively), while including a great deal of useful and interesting information, abound with unfortunate factual errors, typographical mistakes, repetition, contradictions and confusion. In places, Pike seems quite out of his depth when discussing the PAVN’s military hardware. For example, on p. 112 there is the astounding statement that “Some of these Vietnamese warships are equipped with SSN-3 antiship missiles (twenty-one mile range), SSN-2 STYX missiles (thirty-mile range), and SS-21 Frog and SS-23 Scud missiles”. A glance at standard reference works such as *Jane’s Fighting Ships* and *The Military Balance* would have revealed that the SSN-2 is the only one of these missile types in service with the Vietnamese navy; the SS-21, SS-23, Frog and Scud are *four* different types of *land-based* missiles, none of which are in service with the PAVN.

Despite these problems (which could be rectified without a great deal of difficulty if a second, updated edition is eventually produced), *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* is highly recommended to anyone interested in penetrating the myths which surround Vietnam’s “military might”.

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