

Operation Lam Son 719 amid “Vietnamization” Strategy during Vietnam War



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ABSTRACT: Fifty years ago, Operation Lam Son 719 was organized by the US Army and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to realize their scheme to cut off the Indochina battlefield separating the Vietnam revolutionary forces from the revolutionary movement of Laos and Cambodia. Based on historical evidence from previous Vietnamese and USA documents, this article aims to prove that Operation Lam Son 719 made many strategic mistakes in assessing the military power of ARVN and the revolutionary alliance of Vietnam - Laos – Cambodia during the Vietnam War, as well as the tactical mistakes on the battlefield of ARVN. The failure of Operation Lam Son 719 dealt a heavy blow to the Vietnamization strategy, showing the passive strategic approach in the Doctrine of Vietnamization. Operation Lam Son 719 played a big role in forcing the U S to agree to negotiate with Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Paris.

KEYWORDS: Operation Lam Son 719, Nixon, Vietnamization, People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

I. INTRODUCTION

January 20th, 1969, Nixon entered the White House when the situation in their war against Vietnam had become a bone in the throat for many years without a solution. After 1968, Nixon realized that a military victory in Vietnam was no longer possible for the United States. However, Nixon did not accept becoming the first American President in history to lose a war and had to withdraw the US Army from Vietnam like France. Besides, Nixon would not accept peace at just any costs, he only wanted a peaceful solution that also saved face for the US. Therefore, Nixon proposed the policy of Vietnamization, not Non - Americanization for the Vietnam war like what Johnson had done. Vietnamization was not perfect solution, but in terms of reality, this policy might help Nixon to solve the problems posed by the American public for the new government: firstly, not make the US military fail in Vietnam, secondly, bring American prisoners of war and soldiers back home safely; thirdly, get more time to strengthen the Republic of Vietnam regime to stand by itself under American influence. In order to carry out the Vietnamization plan successfully, Nixon had to eliminate the North Vietnam’s resistance bases (called The Sanctuary by the US) and the strategic supplying line of the Vietnamese revolution (known as Ho Chi Minh Trail) through Laos and Cambodia. Therefore, Nixon decided to escalate the war and expand it into Laos and Cambodia (1969-1973). During the wartime in Cambodia and Laos, the US and the Saigon government held a lot of large-scale operations, typically as the Lam Son 719 operation at the 9-Southern Laos Road, early 1971. The campaign is known by some different names. The US called it “Operation Dewey Canyon-II”, named after Operation Dewey Canyon conducted by the US marines in the Northwest region of South Vietnam in 1969. The Saigon government called it “Operation Lam Son 719”. Meanwhile, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam called it “Operation Lower Laos” or “Operation 9-South Laos Road”

What was the root of this military campaign? The goals and the level of success of it achieved? What is the impact of Lam Son 719 on the Vietnamization strategy? This article attempts to clarify these issues on the basis of reviewing and analyzing the different points views of Vietnamese and Western scholars on this operation and its relation with Nixon’s doctrine of Vietnamization.

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II. STRATEGY OF VIETNAMIZATION AND FORMATION OF THE OPERATION LAM SON 719

1. Strategy of Vietnamization

The Nixon’s doctrine of Vietnamization is not a recipe for the US to withdraw from Asia. On the contrary, it is a new approach for the US in order to maintain American influence in Asia¹ (Nixon, 1978, p.286). Hanoi understood the Vietnamization as a collection of three wars: the war over human resources to pacify the countryside, the war to destroy and defeat the enemy's army, and the war to create strangulation in order to prevent the aid of Hanoi's allies to National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam ²(Bo Quoc phong, 1984, p.199). The general objectives of Vietnamization were: (i) building a strong Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to be able to defeat the enemy; (ii) pacifying the countryside, controlling most of the land and population in South Vietnam; (iii) stabilizing the domestic political and economic situation in South Vietnam; (iv) abolishing enemy bases in Laos and Cambodia, restraining Soviet and Chinese aids to Hanoi³(Lich su Nam Bo khang chien, 2010, p.696).

According to the Vietnamese understanding of the problem, Vietnamization is carried out through three main stages: Phase 1: (1969 - 1972) transferring ground operations to the Saigon’s army (ARVN), weakening the enemy’s force on a large scale, and gradually withdrawing US soldiers back home.

Phase 2: (after 1972) transferring air operations to ARVN, upgrading the ARVN in order to confront enemy troops in all combat types and combat sizes throughout the territory of Vietnam and Indochina.

Phase 3: (after 1975) completing the Vietnamization, annihilating the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), the war fades, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam remains only an opposing political force⁴ (Lich sử Nam Bo khang chien, 2010, p.697)

Hanoi also knew that among three phases above, the US and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) consider phase 1 as decisive important, so a detailed three-step plan was set out:

Step 1: (until Jun 30th, 1970) pacifying some important populous areas. In the disputed areas, the enemy army was no longer able to operate at company level, ARVN was able to deal with the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Viet Cong; and US troops withdrew partially.

Step 2: (until Jun 30th, 1971) pacifying all the important populous areas, the enemy army could no longer operate at the company level in their base area, the enemy's rear was paralyzed; ARVN continued being more modernized, most of the US force had been withdrawn.

Step 3: (until 1972) the enemy army become mostly inactive; Cambodia and Laos territories were no longer their refuge; ARVN was capable enough to prevent the North Vietnamese’s invasions, the US withdrew all its troops back home⁵(Bo quoc phong, 1984, p.179). Since then, the US has changed its point of view on directing the war, from simply "search and destroy" to a war to pacify the territory and seize the population. The US’s war leadership apparatus also changed by unifying the three agencies of The US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), the US Embassy, and the CIA Intelligence Division into Cooperation for Rural Development Support (MAC.CORDS), under the leadership of General Creighton Abrams (Lich su Nam Bo khang chien, 2010, p.698)

Of course, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) must also change the government system towards radical militarization. General Tran Thien Khiem holds the position of Chairman of the Central Pacification Council, but in fact, President Nguyen Van Thieu holds full power (Lịch sử Nam Bo khang chien, 2010, p.699). The provincial level was equivalent to the military sub-regional level, with the Governor directly managing the pacification work. The former intermediate tactical zone has been removed. Legions and military zones participated directly in the pacification process. The number of soldiers of RVN increased rapidly from 717,000 (1968) to 1,100,000 (1972) and 500,000 militiamen (Bo quoc phong, 1984, p.183, 187). The US and RVN also promoted the Phoenix program, established by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1967, using an intelligence organization to detect and purify the Viet Cong from the population. Operation Lam Son 719, the attack on the Ho Chi Minh trail system, was seen as a major test for the US policy of Vietnamization(John Prados, 1998, p.317-361).

2. Formation of Operation Lam Son 719

After using the air force and elite reconnaissance force to wage a secret war against Cambodia, on March 18th, 1970, the US stood up for General Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak to conduct a coup, overthrowing Sihanouk and abolishing Sihanouk’s policy on peace and neutrality for Cambodia. Sihanouk's coup revealed another ambition in Nixon's policy in Indochina. The port of Sihanoukville, a very important strategic transit route for Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which in Palmer's opinion "became a major logistics center supporting the activities of the revolutionary forces in the southern half of South Vietnam” was closed (Palmer, D.R, 1978, p.285). On the other hand, the maritime shipping route of the North Vietnam, which started from the ports in the North Vietnam and ran down to the Bien Đông (South China Sea) along the coasts of Central and South Vietnam (called as the Ho Chi Minh Trail at sea) discovered after the Vung Ro incident (February 1965), was fiercely attacked by US troops and ARVN. On March 11th, 1965, the US established the Coastal Patrol Force and conducted Operation Market Time which lasted until December 1970. The

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Operation Market Time campaign effectively blocked seaborne supplies from the North to the South. After that, US force and ARVN coordinated to launch large-scale operations to attack Cambodia, eradicating the resistance bases and shipping routes of the North Vietnamese in Cambodia (Sihanouk trail).

At the end of 1970, MACV Command assumed that after the loss of Sihanouk-Ville port and the attack of strategic bases of the North Vietnamese in Cambodia, North Vietnam's supplies for the South Vietnam battlefield has decreased. Therefore, the North would increase reinforcements to the Southern battlefield through the West Truong Son road and expand this transport route from Southeast Laos to get deeper into Cambodian territory. The secret bombing campaigns of the Air Force and reconnaissance activities of the US - ARVN commandos could reduce the flow of people and supplies from the North to the South via Laos, but not stop it. Therefore, when the attacks of US troops and ARVN in Cambodia took place, General Abrams and Admiral McCain were especially interested in taking measures to prevent the North Vietnamese from expanding their rearward supply lines from Southeast Laos to Northeast Cambodia to replace the loss of Sihanouk-Ville port (Palmer, 1978; p. 286).

At that time, there were increasing signs of logistical activity in Southeast Laos, which signaled an upcoming major attack by PAVN (Dave R. Palmer, 1978, p.286). A CIA report estimated about 90% of PAVN's supplies transported along the Truong Son road were being sent into the three northernmost provinces of the RVN, a phenomenon indicating PAVN's preparation for a major offensive (Nolan, 1986, p.14), .

According to the CIA's assessment, DRV would likely launch a large offensive in 1971 or 1972 to disrupt the policy of pacification and Vietnamization in order to strengthen their negotiating position in Paris, and influence the presidential elections in South Vietnam and in the US. The CIA thought that the attack could happen at North of Military Region I, where US Force had just withdrawn most of its combat forces. This situation changed in favor of the enemy. Meanwhile, MACV Command observed that, during October and November 1970, DRV was increasing its military activities, which showed that they were preparing for a largescale attack similar to Tet Offensive 1968. They were gathering forces just above the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for a possible attack in early 1971 (Palmer, 1978, p.291-292).

November 1970, President Nixon and his advisers met to discuss an action plan for the years of 1971-1972, focusing on three basic goals: (i) continuing Vietnamization, (ii) enhancing the strength of ARVN so they can defend themselves and (iii) weakening the Viet Cong forces. Since then, Nixon decided to use air force, artillery, and logistics to support the ARVN launch three large-scale operations: Lam Son 719 attacking the 9th - Southern Road of Laos, Toan Thang 1-71 NB targeting the Northeastern region of Cambodia and Quang Trung 4 striking the border junction. Operation Lam Son 719 invading Laos was identified as the major attack direction (Nguyen Van Nhat, 2009, p.317). Therefore, Lam Son 719 was the largest-scale operation among three operations of 1971 on the Indochina battlefield. Ho Khang, a Vietnamese scholar, commented: "The US fosters ambition with these operations to weaken the fighting power of the people of three Indochinese countries and prevent major attacks by the revolutionary forces from the rest of 1971 and even up to early 1972, creating conditions for the US to implement the strategy of Vietnamization, gradually withdrawing US troops home; but still forcing the enemy to make concession to the terms posed by the US and RVN (Ho Khang, 2015, p. 280).

After meeting with President Nixon, on December 6th, 1970, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer (replacing General Earle Wheeler from July 2th, 1970) planned for an attack overland crossing the Laos border. He informed Admiral McCain and General Abrams that the president Nixon desired concepts for multidivision South Vietnamese offensives in Cambodia and the Laotian panhandle, to be conducted early in the new year with full US air support; anh General Abrams was to consult with Ambassador Bunker and President Thieu on the operations and obtain Thieu's support for them (Cosmas, 2006, p.321). On December 24th, 1970, General Abrams was authorized to plan the use of B-52s and helicopters to whatever extent necessary for the success of the operation. On January 6th, 1971, Admiral Moorer, on behalf of the government, authorized MACV Command to use its forces to conduct support for the coordinated cross-border operation (Cosmas, 2006, p.322).

On January 18th, 1971, Nixon chaired a meeting including: Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, CIA Director Richard Helms, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, General Alexander Haig (Kissinger's Assistant) and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. President Nixon inquired the advisers to research and plan a prioritized operation to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos. According to Nixon, 95% of the guns and ammunition used by the Viet Cong were transported through the port of Sihanouk-Ville. He pointed out in the meeting: "...Now, all of that goes through Laos by the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In mid-December 1970, Laos was flooded with people and weapons of the North Vietnamese, most of which were being transported into Cambodia in preparation for the offensive in the early spring of 1971." (Nixon, 1978, p.600) The infiltration of PAVN troops and goods through Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam was a serious threat to the security situation there, especially in the northern provinces of Military Region 1, where US troop has just been withdrawn. Therefore, President Nixon officially decided to approve the plan to attack Laos.

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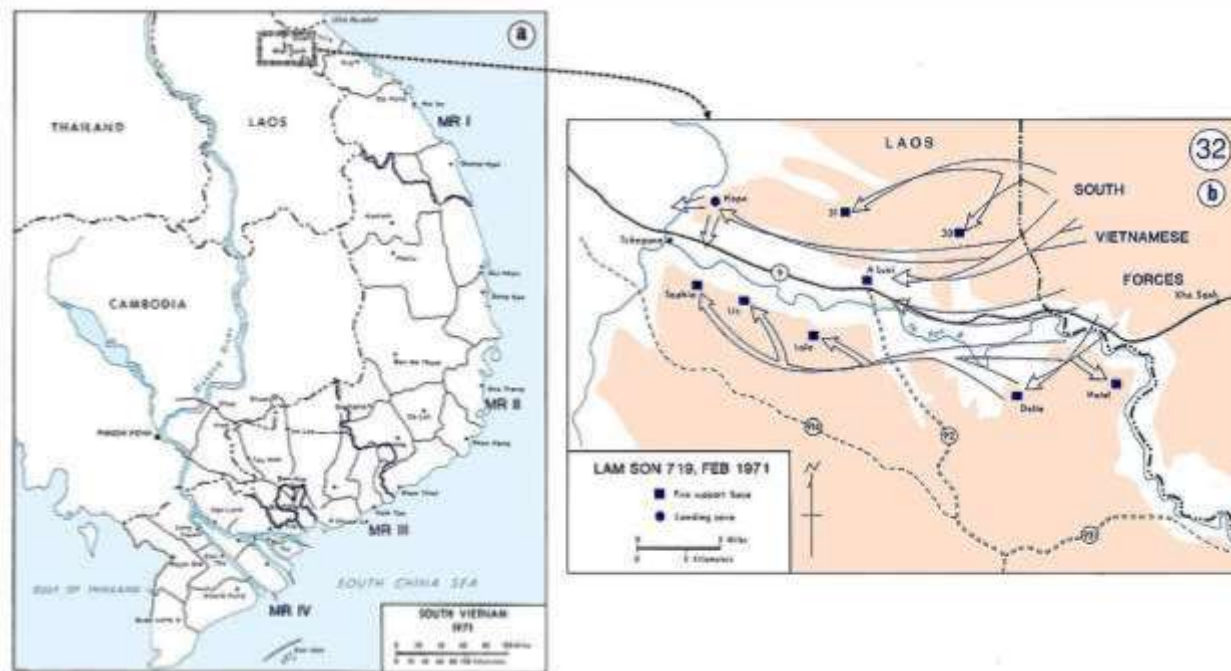


Chart of Operation Lam Son 719 here. Retrieved from [Link](#)

On 7 January 1971 MACV was ordered to make detailed plans for the attack on PAVN bases 604 and 611. According to the plan, the campaign would include 4 steps. The first 2 steps involve ARVN tanks advance along Route 9 towards the Laotian town of Tchepone - the PAVN's 604th logistics base. The attack formation would be protected by parachute, commando units on the northern flank, and the First Infantry Division on the southern flank. In the third step, the operations on “search and kill” at Tchepone would be carried out. As a final step, the ARVN troops would withdraw along Route 9 or through base 611 and out of Laos via the A Sau valley (Palmer, 1978, p.304). The planners had hoped that ARVN troops could stay in Laos until the rain season beginning in early May (Stanley Karnow, 1983, p. 629).

In early 1971, US intelligence estimated the PAVN force in base 604 to be approximately 22,000 persons, including 7,000 combat troops, 10,000 in logistics and support units, and 5,000 Pathet Lao troops. All of them were under the command of the newly formed Front 702 (Fulgham, Terrence Maitland, 1984, p. 66). Despite being kept very confidential; the plan was revealed. Tong Van Trinh, an PAVN agent acted as an employee of the Vientiane Public Works Department. He discovered Americans plan a month before the campaign's start, and then reported it to General Department 2 in Hanoi (Nguoi tinh bao phat hien ke hoach duong 9 Nam Lao).

III. MILITARY, POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF LAM SON 719

The campaign was carried out by ARVN with the maximum support of American air, artillery and logistics. According to the researchers, Lam Son 719 campaign had three basic goals: military, political and strategic.

1. Military objectives of the Lam Son 719 operation

The goal of ARVN troops was to destroy enemy's forces stationed in the area around Route 9 extending from the border to the town of Tchepone, to destroy all enemy's petroleum and logistics depots; to control all activities along the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to South. According to Dallek's comment, Nixon believed that the invasion of Laos and South Vietnam might cut off supplies and the infiltration of PAVN troops into the territory of South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos. He also believed that this invasion, along with continued successful Vietnamization would somehow help to maintain the independence of South Vietnam, as well as bring the Vietnam War to an honorable end for the United States and their allies (Dallek, 2018, chapter 1). Regarding the military objective of the campaign, Dallek concluded: “There is no doubt that Nixon and his administration considered the cutting of enemy supply lines on the Ho Chi Minh Trail (the main objective of Operation Lam Son 719) a very important mission. Nixon himself was well aware that over 500,000 North Vietnamese troops had crossed into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and that “this route provides the great bulk of men and supplies for war in South Vietnam”. President Nixon's own words make clear that he felt this mission was vital to the overall war in South Vietnam, yet the first test of his Vietnamization policy did very little to cut supply lines of the North Vietnamese on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos” Dallek, 2018, chapter 3).

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2. Political objectives of the Lam Son 719 operation

As negotiations between the US and DRV in Paris had made no progress, the political gains from the campaign played a vital role in the context of American politics in 1971-1972. In 1970 the National Security Council concluded that the US could neither persuade nor force Hanoi to withdraw its troops from South Vietnam (Herring, 1998, p.308). Meanwhile, President Nixon managed to avoid restrictions on his right to wage war. However, he still faced more hostile and determined opposition in the Congress and the resurgent anti-war movement. In 1972, the year of the presidential election in the US, Nixon needed to gain the trust and support of voters in his campaign for a second term of presidency. Dallek commented that evidently Nixon considered his presidential campaign more important than the lives of South Vietnamese soldiers, who had never gone into battle without US advisers before the invasion of Laos (Dallek, 2018, chapter 3). Nixon was trying to prove to voters that the war was moving in a positive direction. The operation to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos would cause great damage to the North Vietnamese forces, and at the same time, reduce the threat to South Vietnam, ensure South Vietnam's security, and buy time for Vietnamization. In addition, the success of Operation Lam Son 719 will contribute to the pacification of the anti-war movement that was growing and spreading since Nixon sent troops into Cambodia.

3. Strategic Objectives of Operation Lam Son 719

If the operation were to be won, President Nixon would succeed in carrying out the plot to divide the Indochina battlefield into two halves, separating the South Vietnam and the North Vietnam communist from the patriotic movement of Laos and Cambodia, suffocating the national liberation movement in the Indochinese peninsula. The eradication of the PAVN's transportation routes and strategic logistics facilities in the area of Road 9-Southern Laos means all source of reinforcements was cut from the root. This meant the revolutionary armed forces (PAVN and Viet Cong troops) could not hold large-scale battles in the dry season of 1971-1972. They would need to return to small and scattered activities within the framework of a guerrilla war. As the result, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam gradually decline and Vietnamization would come to success. The ARVN would have more time to consolidate, develop, and be able to replace the role of American troops on the battlefield of Indochina. Nixon's plan to invade Laos and prevent enemy supplies from entering South Vietnam was not a bad idea in theory, if successful it certainly would have advanced the goals of America and its allies in regards to the Vietnam War (Dallek, 2018, chapter 1)

In addition, according to Nixon's estimation, after the planned withdrawals by the end of 1970, US forces remaining in South Vietnam were 335,790 soldiers, fully equipped. (Ban chi dao tong ket chien tranh, 2000, p.503)

This was the reason Nixon had to take into account and decide quickly. if the operation was not launched in early 1971, the necessary firepower from American troops would decrease along with the withdrawal in the following year.

Road 9 - South Laos was considered by the Americans as the "throat" of the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos. This is a main blood vessel of the Indochinese revolution, an area where almost all strategic reserves were concentrated. There were three important roads in the area: Road 9 which is the single route to travel Dong Ha-Ban Dong-Tchepone; Road 16 through Ho Village to Ban Dong and connects with Road 22 to Muangnoong; Road 18 through Thakhong to Muangnoong. These are the strategic transport corridors of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Therefore, the scope of Operation Lam Son 719 took place in the 90km by 60km area along Route 9 from Dong Ha (Quang Tri) to Tchepone (Savannakhet). Before the operation took place, Nixon confidently declared: “Because of public opinion in America and because South Vietnam wanted to demonstrate the success of Vietnamization, we decided to take this operation” (Nixon, 1978, p.600). He announced the operation would be the job of the army of the Republic of Vietnam, the United States only guaranteed the airspace and supported the battle with artillery. The primary responsibilities of American forces were transporting soldiers and arms by helicopter, artillery support, and B-52 carpet bombing (Nixon, 1978, p.601). President Nixon and President Nguyen Van Thieu both considered operation Lam Son 719 to be important and decisive to create a great turning point in politics, military and diplomacy while the war was in a stalemate (Nguyen Van Nhat, 2009, p.316).

The US and the Saigon government mobilized 42,000 troops, including 33,000 ARVN soldiers and 9,000 US soldiers. The US ground support force was Army 24 commanded by Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland Jr. Yet. March 10th, 1971, at the peak of the campaign, the US and the Saigon government increased their forces up to 55,000 troops (40,000 troops of ARVN and 15,000 US troops), including 15 infantry regiments. infantry, 3 armored squadrons, 578 tanks, armored vehicles, 318 cannons, 700 aircraft of all kinds (including B-52s). In addition, there are two mobile corps (GM-30 and GM-33) of the Vientiane Government. All troops participating in the operation were combat-ready units of the strategic reserve force and the mobile main force of the I Corps - the Tactical Region I. Commanding the operation Lam Son 719 was Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the I Corps tactical zone. (Ho Khang, 2015, p. 282-291)

Hanoi initially placed its attention on a diversionary operation carried out off the coast of the DRV for the US Navy. The Legion 70th (PAVN) ordered 3 divisions 304, 308, and 320 to enter the combat zone in Southern Laos. In particular, the 2nd Division

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PAVN also marched from the south to the Tchepone area and began to move east to meet the threat of the ARVN. By early March, PAVN had 36,000 troops in the area, one and a half times the number of ARVN troops (Fulgham, Terrence Maitland, 1984, p.76)

At 22:00, on February 8th, 1971, under the orders of General Hoang Xuan Lam, the ARVN combat forces from Quang Tri along Route 9 crossed the border to attack Laos. At 23:00 on February 8th, 1971, President Nguyen Van Thieu appeared on television and declared: "It was the decision made solely by the Saigon government, the operation was completely led by the South Vietnamese, the US only provided air support. This operation was very limited in time and space (Nguyen Phu Duc, 2009, p. 272-73). Thieu's statement was intended to reassure Congress and the American people who opposed the war.

IV. INFLUENCE OF OPERATION LAM SON 719 ON VIETNAM STRATEGY

Operation Lam Son 719 was carried out from February 8th, 1971 to March 23th, 1971, lasted nearly 50 days and nights, but failed to achieve its strategic goals.

The PAVN conducted counter-attacks in a traditional regular war style, using the encirclement tactic, launching massive infantry attacks with armored vehicles and heavy artillery support to crush the position of ARVN troops on the flanks of the main front. The anti-aircraft firepower of PAVN made tactical air support and American air reinforcements difficult and suffered a lot of damage. During skirmishes with the US - ARVN troops, the PAVN units suffered heavy casualties from bombs, artillery, assaults from helicopters armed with guns, and standard firearms. Despite that, they had shown such combat prowess and courage that the opposing forces were astonished. William D. Morrow, an advisor to the ARVN Airborne Division, made a short statement on the PAVN soldiers: "they can defeat any army behind this invasion." (Gloria Emerson, 1973)

For ARVN, the baseline tactic of Operation Lam Son 719 was "fight-and-withdraw". In theory, this would be possible because of their air support and air mobility. In order to cause maximum personnel damage PAVN units, the ARVN troops attacked and established strong points, pulling the enemy into open areas, creating conditions for the strong firepower of US air force and artillery to operate. Although a helicopter attack managed to capture part of Tchepone, it was a costly outcome, as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam only held the town for a short time before withdrawing due to raids attacking the main formation. The strategic objective of cutting the supply line on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not achieved.

Lam Son 719 campaign suffered heavy losses. Two divisions of RVN participated in the war with nearly 50% casualties, 2,000 deaths, despite receiving great support from the US Air Force with more than 48,000 tons of bombs dropped during the campaign (Asselin, 2005, p.43). Another figure: The total number of soldiers removed from combat during the campaign was 8,846. Of those, 1,703 people died, 6,450 were injured, and 693 were missing (Ban chi dao tong ket chien tranh, 2000, p.545). According to the statistics of General Nguyen Duy Hinh, ARVN lost a total of 71 tanks, 163 armored vehicles, 37 engineering vehicles, and 278 trucks destroyed or seized (Nguyen Duy Hinh, 2015, p.127).

American troops suffered lighter casualties, but heavy losses in equipment, especially helicopters. The US Air Force lost 7 fighter planes. The US Army lost 108 helicopters completely destroyed and another 618 damaged (Lam Son 719 Jan – March 1971) In total, the US Army lost 726 helicopters (66% of the approximately 1,100 helicopters mobilized for the operation), of which about 230 were completely destroyed or damaged.

1. Comments on Lam Son 719

President Nguyen Van Thieu's advisor, Nguyen Phu Duc, said that the operation was not a victory as claimed by the Saigon government but a failure as explained by the French news agency AFP or the American Newsweek (Nguyen Phu Duc, 2009, p.375). Robert Elegant, a journalist commented that the Lam Son 719 raid to destroy the logistics base and cut off the supply route of the North Vietnamese on the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail was not a great success (Pham Kim Vinh, 1988, 133). Kolko Gabriel who did an Anatomy of Vietnam War believes that Lam Son 719 Campaign, a key battle of the Vietnamization, suffered a complete failure (Kolko, 2003, p. 431). Robert Dallek considered Lam Son campaign 719 unnecessary. On Dallek's opinion, there were three main reasons why Nixon should have decided to call off the invasion or seriously revise the strategy for the invasion. The first reason was that several of his own administration members were opposed to the operation, and made these opinions known before the invasion took place. The second reason why Operation Lam Son 719 should have either been terminated or at least revised was the numerous failures by the Americans and their Laotian allies in the years leading up to this 1971 invasion. The final reason the invasion should have been reconsidered was the fact that the ground troops Nixon sent in to Laos (South Vietnamese and Hmong) were heavily over matched, something recent history had proven time and time again in Laos and the Vietnam War in general. These forces were not only outnumbered by their communist adversaries, but were also out-gunned, much less experienced, and by that point in the war were demoralized and lacked the war-hardened instinct that the North Vietnamese had developed by that point in the war (Dallek, 2018, chapter 1).

After Operation Lam Son 719, advisor Henry Kissinger was in a very uneasy mood. Herring commented that the US

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government's claims about North Vietnamese troops had "ordered their troops out" was ludicrous; and the image of Saigon soldiers desperately clinging to the landing gear of a helicopter had sparked a sensation. Many questions arose about the success of Vietnamization (Herring, 1998, p.310).

Newspaper Nhan Dan No. 6164, published on March 8, 1971, published the announcement of Pathet Lao News Agency a list of three officers of the Republic of Vietnam arrested on February 25, 1971, at hill 31, peak 456 Southern Laos includes: Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, Brigade Commander of the 3rd Airborne Brigade; Lieutenant Colonel Bui Van Chau, Chief of Artillery Battalion of 3rd Airborne Brigade; Major Tran Van Duc, Head of the 3rd Operations Staff of the 3rd Airborne Brigade. Mr. Phan Thien Quoc, campaign envoy for the 9th-South Laos Road, who directly participated in the interrogation of Colonel Nguyen Van Tho said the following: "A reporter asked, what do you think about the ARVN combat ability? Tho replied: "When we were under heavy attack by the revolutionary forces, everyone tried to flee." The reporter continued to ask, "what do you think about the Lam Son 719 operation?" Tho thought about it for a while and said: "Right after the meeting of senior officers in ARVN to organize the coordination between the ARVN troops in the campaign, we whispered to each other that the operation would fail. Because in 1968, US troops at Route 9- Khe Sanh were defeated even with solid fortification system and maximum artillery support. At Road 9 - Southern Laos, American infantry were not involved, we were only supported by artillery, yet clashed against you (the PAVN), an active army on a battlefield that had been rigged and "laid-out", our failure is inevitable." (Phan Quoc Thien, 2003)

Why did Colonel Nguyen Van Tho use the word "laid-out" in the interview? Regarding this, Larry Berman recorded the words of Vietnamese strategic intelligence general Pham Xuan An as follows:

"I remember the day I met the colonel, who had been absent from Saigon for a few days. His skin was tanned and I knew he had just come back from somewhere, so I asked, "Did you just come back from fishing in Southern Laos?" He smiled and I knew immediately what the answer was. I was very nervous because I knew what was waiting for them all there. I told him to be careful... I didn't want to ruin the other side's plans [i.e DRV], but I wanted my friends to be careful." (Berman, 2013, p. 230)

Within their assessment of the situation, General Cao Van Vien and General Dong Van Khuyen wrote: "The enemy was not surprised by the Lam Son 719 campaign and they were prepared in advance to confront our army." (Berman, 2013, p. 230) Thus, it is impossible to say that Operation Lam Son 719 was a success like the optimistic words of President Nixon, anti-guerrilla expert Robert Thompson, and President Nguyen Van Thieu. Because the basic objectives of the operation were not achieved.

2. *Victory or defeat?*

Anti-guerrilla expert Robert Thompson told Kissinger: "Thanks to Operation Lam Son 719, there was no attack by PAVN and Viet Cong in 1971. So, American and South Vietnamese losses decreased, Vietnamization was conducted on a regular basis" (Nixon, 1978, p. 601). During a press conference in Dong Ha (Quang Tri), on March 31th, 1971, President Nguyen Van Thieu announced that "Operation Lam Son 719 had been successful. The last retreat was just to switch troops". He and the generals of the Saigon army both argued that the operation destroyed North Vietnam's ability to launch major attacks from Laos into the northern parts of South Vietnam (Nguyen Phu Duc, 2009, p.375).

The cause of the failure of Operation Lam Son 719 may also be related to the Revised Cooper-Church Amendment. Because Nixon waged the war to invade Cambodia without consulting Congress before. Senators Cooper (Republican) and Church (Democrat) have proposed a bill that would not spend money without congressional approval. If the Cooper-Church Amendment had gained legal force, then US military intervention in Cambodia and Laos would have been significantly reduced. On June 30th, 1970, the Senate passed the amendment with a ratio of 58/37 votes. The US Congress approved the Cooper-Church Amendment and officially called it Public Law 91-652, which took effect on January 5th, 1971, just one month before Operation Lam Son 719 took place. Therefore, in this operation, US forces can only participate on land constructing roads and bridges connecting Vietnam-Laos border. After that, the US army only participated in the shelling from Khe Sanh, Lao Bao; or in bombing missions to support air operations. Moreover, at this time the anti-war movement increased strongly, if the American troops were damaged in the war, it might affect Nixon's election campaign.

This was the first time from 1965 to the time of Lam Son 719 operation (early 1971), ARVN troops fought independently in a large-scale operation across the border without the US force's participation. Americans only played a supporting role as described by military historian Keith W. Nolan in his book *Into Laos* (Nolan, 1986). Thus, ARVN lost their shield. On the other hand, the Lam Son 719 campaign took place when the morale of the ARVN was declining since the Tet Offensive in 1968, not having enough strength to fight in a large battlefield throughout Indochina. Author Herring commented "Lam Son 719 operation showed that the combat ability of ARVN was below expectations, and if the US air force had not dropped 48,000 tons of bombs to support, they would have fought much worse" (Herring, p. 310). In conducting the Vietnamization, the United States relied on three main pillars: ARVN, the pacification program to control the peasantry, and a strong Saigon government. The failure of the Lam Son 719 operation shook America's trust in ARVN to its roots. At this time, in the eyes of the Americans, ARVN was just a cowardly rabbit and a money

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sucker. General Alexander Haig was right when he said that Operation Lam Son 719, cutting off the West Truong Son road at the town of Tchepone, showed many limitations of the ARVN. Vietnamization would never have been successful without large numbers of American troops (Maclear, 1990, p.192-93).

Faced with that situation, Nixon immediately Americanized the war. On April 6th, 1972, the US Air Force and Navy attacked North Vietnam again; at the same time, the US increased aid to the army of the Republic of Vietnam to counter the attack of the PAVN. After Operation Lam Son 719, the revolutionary forces of the South (i.e PAVN and Viet Cong) re-developed and stood firmly in key strategic areas. The victory of PAVN in Operation Lam Son 719 made an important contribution in forcing the US to negotiate and sign the Paris Agreement on January 27, 1973, withdrawing its troops from Vietnam.

VI. CONCLUSION

Operation Lam Son 719 took place exactly half a century ago. When discussing the impact of this operation of Vietnamization, it is possible to agree with the statement of a researcher about the coordinated cross-border operations of the US with ARVN in the 1970-1971: “The cross-border operations in 1970-1971 on the strategic chessboard should have been conducted from 1966-1967. From a strategic point of view, if such operations were considered appropriate in the past, in the future, they would be considered as urgent” (Palmer, 1978, p. 298). Thus, Operation Lam Son 719, an important “test” of the Vietnamization, took place in an urgent situation. This shows the passive nature in the strategic planning process of Vietnamization.

Operation Lam Son 719 showed that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was not an equal opponent for the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), being unable to fight without the participation of US troops on the ground and in the air.

Due to inherent flaws in the US and RVN command systems, poor planning, the incompetence of US and RVN military political leaders when faced with the battlefield situation, and poor operational performance, Operation Lam Son 719 collapsed in the face of resolute and skillful resistance from PAVN. This campaign was a disaster for ARVN, destroying their best combat units. For the US, the strategy of Vietnamization, which many American political and military officials had seen as the best way to save the RVN and complete the withdrawal of US troops, was proven a failure.

The victory of the Vietnamese army in the Lam Son 719 campaign helped the Liberation Army protect the strategic transport corridor along the Vietnam-Laos border firmly, bankrupting an important strategic step of Vietnamization; strongly influenced the situation of war on the battlefields of the three Indochina countries; contributed to strengthening the solidarity and fighting spirit of the people of the three Indochinese countries against a common enemy. Through this victory, the balance of power and strategic positions on the southern battlefield in particular and on the Indochinese battlefield changed drastically. The victory of the People’s Army of Vietnam in the Lam Son 719 campaign ushered in a period of rich development, with a variety of fighting methods, bringing the art of counter-attack to a higher and more complete level.

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