

Operation Enhance and Enhance Plus Military Aid in the Context of Vietnamization

Nguyen Van Phuoc

PhD Candidate, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes two military aid campaigns, Operation Enhance and Operation Enhance Plus, deployed by the United States for the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) within the context of the "Vietnamization" strategy (1969-1973). Following the failure of the "Local War" strategy and the pressure resulting from the 1968 Tet Offensive, the United States shifted towards gradually reducing its direct military role while bolstering the RVN's self-defense capabilities. Notably, in response to the 1972 Spring-Summer Offensive (Easter Offensive) by the Liberation Army of the South, Washington executed two emergency aid programs of unprecedented scale: Enhance and Enhance Plus. These operations transferred a massive quantity of weaponry, bases, and logistical facilities to the RVN to consolidate its battlefield posture and negotiating position in Paris. However, despite the sharp increase in aid volume, the RVN's capacity for maintenance, operation, and training failed to meet the demands of modern warfare. The success of these two campaigns was primarily temporary and political, failing to help the RVN achieve military autonomy. When U.S. aid was curtailed following the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, the majority of the weapons and equipment from these campaigns became ineffective, thereby clearly demonstrating the limitations of the Vietnamization policy.

KEYWORDS: Republic of Vietnam, Military Aid, Operation Enhance, Operation Enhance Plus, Vietnamization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Following the failure of the "Local War" strategy (1965–1968) and the political shock of the 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising, the United States entered a period of comprehensive strategic reorientation in Vietnam. The administration of President Richard Nixon (1969–1974) established the "Vietnamization" policy—an effort to gradually reduce the direct combat role of U.S. troops while simultaneously strengthening the self-defense capabilities of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The objective of this policy was to "shift the burden of war" to the Southern ally, maintaining U.S. influence in Southeast Asia while seeking "peace with honor" amidst domestic public pressure and the negotiations in Paris.

However, by early 1972, the Vietnamization process fell into crisis. The Liberation Army of South Vietnam and the People's Army of Vietnam launched the Spring-Summer Offensive of 1972 (also known as the Easter Offensive), attacking simultaneously on three strategic fronts: Quang Tri - Tri Thien, the Central Highlands, and Eastern South Vietnam. The RVN's main defensive lines were quickly threatened; key bases such as Quang Tri, Kontum, and An Loc became focal points of fierce combat. In this context, Washington was forced to choose a situational solution: accelerating large-scale military aid to the RVN to both halt the adversary's offensive momentum and consolidate the U.S. negotiating position in Paris.

From May 1972, the U.S. Department of Defense, in coordination with the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), launched Operation Enhance, and only a few months later, expanded it into Operation Enhance Plus—two emergency aid programs unprecedented in the entire war. Hundreds of aircraft, tanks, artillery pieces, mechanized vehicles, electronic equipment, and military bases were transferred to the RVN in a short period before the terms of the 1973 Paris Agreement took effect.

Strategically, Operations Enhance and Enhance Plus represented the United States' final effort to ensure its Southern ally was strong enough to "stand alone" upon U.S. withdrawal. However, in reality, they also reflected the internal contradictions of Vietnamization: while aid skyrocketed in quantity, the RVN's ability to maintain, service, and train for such equipment did not meet the requirements of modern warfare. Consequently, the "success" of these aid campaigns was more temporary and political than military in nature.

II. OBJECTIVES

This article aims to provide an overall analysis of the two military aid campaigns, Enhance and Enhance Plus, clarifying their roles in the U.S. Vietnamization strategy, as well as their impact on national defense capabilities and the eventual collapse of the Republic of Vietnam.

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III. SCOPE

This article comprehensively analyzes the formation process, content, and historical significance of Operations Enhance and Enhance Plus, which are viewed as both the culmination and the ultimate limit of the Vietnamization policy.

IV. TIMEFRAME AND METHODOLOGY

Timeframe: 1972 – 1973. **Geographical Area:** South Vietnam.

General Research Methodology: The article is based on the methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism.

Specific Research Methods: A combination of two main methods: the historical method and the logical method.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Context

1.1. The Decline of U.S. Commitment and the Vietnamization Process

In January 1969, Richard Nixon officially took office as President of the United States, inheriting the heavy legacy of the Vietnam War. Amidst an increasingly unfavorable international context and domestic turmoil, the United States began to show signs of declining superpower status. According to McCormick (1995), this was a period in which the U.S. "showed clear evidence of a decline in its ability to function as the center of the world system."

The Nixon administration implemented the Vietnamization strategy as a solution to "exit with honor" from the U.S. war in Vietnam. The primary goal was to gradually withdraw U.S. troops, transferring combat responsibility to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), while maintaining military and diplomatic pressure to achieve a favorable peace agreement (Herring, 2002). By mid-1971, U.S. troop levels in Vietnam had dropped from over 540,000 (1969) to under 160,000. Concurrently, Washington reduced direct aid budgets and cut the number of military advisors. U.S. combat units withdrew from most tactical zones, leaving only advisory and logistical support forces. Although the RVN Armed Forces expanded in scale (reaching over one million troops, including 11 regular divisions, 60 local regiments, and a widespread territorial defense system), their mobile combat and logistical capabilities remained heavily dependent on U.S. aid sources (Clarke, 1988).

Domestically, the anti-war wave in the U.S. grew stronger. Congress demanded war budget cuts, and the media continuously criticized the prolonged intervention. Public demand to "bring American boys home" forced the Nixon administration to withdraw faster than anticipated, effectively pushing the battlefield burden onto the RVN while its autonomous capacity remained incomplete. In a speech on July 25, 1969, at a military base on Guam, President Nixon announced a new doctrine for U.S. policy in Asia, later known as the "Nixon Doctrine". It stated that the United States would not defend its Asian allies with U.S. manpower but would only guarantee them a "nuclear umbrella". U.S. foreign policy towards allies "cannot and will not conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world" (National Archives Center II, Nixon Doctrine 1970). This meant the U.S. would gradually reduce its influence on Asian conflicts and only intervene if attacked by major Communist powers. However, the nation directly threatened would have to assume the primary responsibility of providing manpower for its own defense. For allies including the RVN, the role shifted from U.S. primacy to "burden-sharing" among allies in protecting the "free world" (Tran Van Dai Loi, 2017, p. 42).

On February 18, 1970, Nixon delivered a 43,000-word report to Congress, officially announcing the Nixon Doctrine. In Southeast Asia, this was concretized by the policy of "Vietnamization." Initiated by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to replace the concept of "de-Americanizing," the policy focused on enhancing the role of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). Vietnamization was divided into three main phases (Hinh, 1980, pp. 16–17):

1. **Phase One:** Transferring ground combat responsibility to the ARVN, with U.S. forces providing air, naval, and logistical support.
2. **Phase Two:** Enhancing logistical, firepower, and support capabilities for the ARVN to move towards autonomy.
3. **Phase Three:** Reducing the U.S. advisory presence, moving towards a complete withdrawal of combat forces from South Vietnam.

To implement this strategic plan, the U.S. proposed specific measures: developing and modernizing the Saigon army; building a strong Saigon administration; pacifying rural areas; blockading the adversary's economy and transport corridors; and pursuing diplomatic maneuvers to isolate the Vietnamese revolution. According to historian Richard A. Hunt, this was not merely a withdrawal plan but a comprehensive strategy with two prongs: (1) gradual transfer of ground combat responsibility; and (2) urgent modernization of the ARVN through military aid and massive training programs (Hunt, 2015). The goal was to enable the ARVN to hold South Vietnam, allowing the U.S. to withdraw with honor without the immediate collapse of the Saigon regime.

1.2. The 1972 Spring-Summer Offensive

On March 30, 1972, the Liberation Army of South Vietnam launched the Spring-Summer Offensive (The Easter Offensive) simultaneously on three fronts: Tri-Thien, the Central Highlands, and Eastern South Vietnam, aiming to gain battlefield victories to negotiate from a position of strength in Paris.

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- **Quang Tri - Thua Thien Front:** The Liberation Army mobilized three elite regular divisions supported by 200 Soviet-made tanks and heavy artillery, crossing the 17th parallel.
- **Central Highlands:** The Liberation Army captured a large area south of Route 14.
- **Southern Front:** Fierce back-and-forth combat occurred at An Loc.

Eventually, the U.S. deployed B-52 bombers to support the RVN, regaining the initiative. For the RVN, repelling these attacks was seen as evidence of Vietnamization's success. However, U.S. military circles believed this was a hollow victory, as U.S. air power had saved the RVN (Willard & Walter, 2007, p. 188). Dale Andradé concluded that despite Vietnamization, the ARVN revealed problems similar to those of a decade prior, proving that cooperation was only effective with abundant U.S. fire support (Dale, 1995, p. 487).

2. Operation Enhance and Enhance Plus

The years 1972 - 1973 marked the acceleration and conclusion of the Vietnamization policy. The U.S. shifted from "conditional withdrawal" to "withdrawal regardless of conditions." In May 1972, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird instructed MACV to plan for the urgent transfer of remaining equipment at U.S. bases. The goal was to "ensure the RVN's self-defense capability before the Paris Agreement restricted aid" (Clarke, 1988, p. 358). In this context, Operation Enhance (May 1972) and subsequently Operation Enhance Plus (October 1972) were launched.

Operation Enhance (May 1972) Under the direction of MACV, Operation Enhance aimed to accelerate large-scale military aid to stabilize frontlines following the Easter Offensive. It was essentially an "emergency military relief package," drawn directly from U.S. stockpiles. Between May and September 1972, Operation Enhance transferred:

Aircraft: 69 helicopters, 55 jets (mainly A-37 and F-5A), and approximately 100 other aircraft.

Artillery: Battalions of 175mm, 40mm, and 90mm guns, along with M101 and M114 field artillery.

Armor: M48A3 Patton tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers.

Advanced Weaponry: 141 TOW anti-tank missile launchers.

Infrastructure: Transfer of bases at Bien Hoa, Chu Lai, and Pleiku. The total value was estimated at approximately \$300 million (1972 value) (Clarke, 1988, p. 360). However, training was often rushed, lasting only days or weeks, limiting effective usage.

Operation Enhance Plus (October 1972)

As the Paris peace negotiations entered their final phase, the Nixon administration anticipated an armistice that would restrict future military aid. Consequently, on October 20, 1972, Washington approved *Operation Enhance Plus*. The U.S. Army Center of Military History noted this as "the largest transfer of military assets in the entire Vietnam War, conducted in less than two months" (Clarke, 1988, p. 362).

The total value was estimated at \$750 million (1972 value). Key transfers included:

Air Force: 234 jet fighters (F-5A/B, A-37), 32 C-130 transports, and 277 UH-1H helicopters. This made the Republic of Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) the fourth largest in the world at the time.

Armor: 72 M48A3 Patton tanks, 117 M113 APCs.

Navy: Patrol Craft Fast (PCF), PBR river boats.

Infrastructure: Ownership transfer of Tan Son Nhat, Bien Hoa, Da Nang, and Cam Ranh bases.

Organizationally, Enhance Plus was coordinated by MACV and the Defense Security Assistance Agency (DSAA), distributing equipment across the four tactical zones (Corps I-IV). This was considered the "final strategic handover" by the U.S. in Vietnam.

VI. CONCLUSION

Operations Enhance and Enhance Plus were pivotal milestones and the final manifestations of the U.S. Vietnamization strategy (1969-1973). They emerged from a specific context: the U.S. needed an honorable exit, and the RVN needed sufficient aid to survive the U.S. withdrawal.

Inherently, these campaigns reflected the dual objectives of the Nixon-Kissinger strategy: the military goal of restoring RVN combat capacity post-Easter Offensive, and the political-diplomatic goal of facilitating the 1973 Paris Agreement from a position of strength. While achieving a massive quantitative increase - thousands of vehicles and tons of weaponry - these operations failed to create a qualitative change. The RVN's military power remained entirely reliant on U.S. resources and technology. Expanding the arsenal without a corresponding foundation in logistics, defense industry, and personnel training left the RVN rapidly exhausted when the U.S. cut aid after 1973. Strategically, Enhance and Enhance Plus were the "final deluge of aid" - an act of transferring the burden of war rather than true power, leaving the RVN with a massive logistical and financial burden that rendered much of the equipment useless following the aid cuts of 1974.

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