

An Officer of the Argentine Air Force in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article examines the mission of Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear in South Vietnam during the mid-1960s, situating his observations within the broader context of the Cold War and Argentina's stance against global communism. Drawing on his direct experiences with counter-insurgency operations, psychological warfare, and civicmilitary action, the study highlights the strategic lessons he identified for Argentina's defense policy. De Alvear emphasized the importance of intelligence, education, and unified military structures, particularly air-ground units and helicopter deployment, in confronting guerrilla tactics. His insights connected Vietnam's revolutionary conflict to Argentina's own challenges with subversion, underscoring the need for preparation to prevent escalation into armed struggle. The article also explores Argentina's diplomatic alignment with the United States and its participation in training exchanges, framing Vietnam as both a laboratory of modern warfare and a source of doctrinal influence. Ultimately, de Alvear's mission provided Argentina with valuable perspectives on national security and defense modernization.

Between 3 October and 20 November 1964, Argentine Air Force Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear was in the Republic of Vietnam at the formal invitation of the South Vietnamese government. His mission was not ceremonial. It was observational and strategic: to study, firsthand, a pacification and reconstruction campaign unfolding within an active revolutionary war.

Foreign policy, in this context, functioned as more than diplomacy. It operated as a mechanism for the deliberate transfer of strategic knowledge—knowledge capable of shaping institutional modernization, military doctrine, and national preparedness. When organized and directed by the state, such transfers become policy instruments, designed to extract lessons from external conflicts and adapt them to domestic security requirements.¹

De Alvear's mission reflected precisely that logic. Coordinated by the Argentine government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with direct involvement from

¹ Comastri, H. "Científicos alemanes en la Argentina peronista. Límites y potencialidades de una política de transferencia científico-tecnológica". En: *Antíteses*, vol. 2, n.º 4, julio-diciembre de 2009, p. 695. Disponible en <http://www.uel.br/revistas/uel/index.php/antiteses/article/view/2739/3931> (consultado el 13/7/2016).

the Ministry of Defense, the deployment sought to harvest operational, doctrinal, and political insights from Vietnam's counterinsurgency experience. Those lessons were intended to strengthen Argentina's readiness—civilian and military alike—to confront the evolving demands of the Cold War, in which subversion and revolutionary warfare increasingly defined the battlefield.

The Argentine Republic in 1964

In 1964, Argentina was governed by President Arturo Illia, a leader of the Radical Civic Union of the People, an internal faction of the Radical Civic Union. His accession to power followed the elections of 7 July 1963—an outcome shaped as much by absence as by presence. Peronism remained proscribed, and Illia's victory rested on a narrow electoral base, conferring legal authority but limited political leverage.

Illia's foreign policy reflected a principled, almost doctrinal universalism. It emphasized Latin American solidarity, the defense of a peaceful international order, moral conduct in world affairs, national self-determination, non-intervention, and autonomy in decision-making. He promoted regional integration and invested political capital in multilateral frameworks, particularly the Organization of American States and the Alliance for Progress. Yet this moral universalism stopped short of neutrality. In the Cold War's binary contest, Argentina rejected equidistance and aligned itself with the United States in opposition to global communism.

Defense policy mirrored that alignment while expanding its conceptual reach. The Illia government formally incorporated the doctrine of national security, broadening national defense beyond conventional threats to include internal subversion and political warfare. Industrial development was treated as a strategic priority, inseparable from defense capacity. The government advanced a new National Defense Law and pressed forward with the re-equipment of the Armed Forces—most notably through military agreements with the United States—reflecting a growing recognition that modernization, deterrence, and internal stability were now interlinked imperatives.²

On 10 May 1964, Argentina concluded a Military Assistance Program (MAP) agreement with the United States to acquire military equipment, reinforcing a defense relationship already evident in operational cooperation. Argentine forces participated in US-designed hemispheric exercises such as Operation Unitas V in September 1964 and Operation Ayacucho later that year—visible markers of Argentina's integration into the Western security architecture.

² Fraga, R. *La Política de Defensa Argentina. A través de los Mensajes Presidenciales al Congreso. 1854-2001*. Buenos Aires: Instituto de Historia Militar Argentina, 2002, pp. 665 y 676.

Yet external alignment did not translate into internal stability. The Illia government faced sustained pressure on multiple fronts: the political influence exerted from exile by Lieutenant General Juan Domingo Perón in Spain; factional conflict within Peronism itself; mounting labor unrest; and the emergence of rural guerrilla activity. These pressures converged in mid-1964, when organized labor launched a sweeping *Plan de Lucha* against the government, occupying roughly 11,000 factories and workshops nationwide. What began as industrial protest increasingly assumed the character of political confrontation.

More ominously, internal order came under threat from armed subversion. These groups did not operate in isolation. They drew ideological sustenance from the broader currents of Cold War revolutionary warfare: national liberation movements in the Third World, the catalytic example of the Cuban Revolution, and the doctrines of Castroism and Guevarism. Revolutionary Peronism, articulated by figures such as John William Cooke, provided a domestic vehicle for these influences, fusing social grievance with insurgent ambition.

The danger was no longer theoretical. In February 1964, security forces uncovered the Camilo Cienfuegos guerrilla training camp in Icho Cruz–Talahuasi, in the province of Córdoba. Organized by the Communist Party and its youth federation, the camp was dedicated to preparing militants for sabotage and terrorist operations. It offered concrete evidence that revolutionary warfare had moved from rhetoric to preparation—and that Argentina was no longer merely observing the Cold War, but beginning to experience it at home.

In northwestern Argentina, the threat assumed a more explicit armed form. In the Orán region of Salta Province, the People's Guerrilla Army (EGP) operated as a Castroist–Guevarist organization with backing from Revolutionary Action Peronism. Its links were neither rhetorical nor merely aspirational. The EGP benefited from Cuban advisers, received material and financial assistance from Havana, and maintained contact with Cuban and Bolivian guerrilla elements operating in Bolivia under the inspiration of Ernesto “Che” Guevara. By March 1964, the group had been defeated through coordinated action by the National Gendarmerie and the Salta Provincial Police—but its brief existence was strategically instructive. It demonstrated both the feasibility of rural insurgency on Argentine soil and the external networks prepared to sustain it.

The political reverberations were immediate. In August 1964, the Chamber of Deputies convened a parliamentary interpellation of the ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense to address the EGP's activities in northwestern Argentina. At issue were two unresolved questions that cut to the heart of the state's authority: whether the Army should be formally employed in counter-subversive

operations, and whether Argentina required a new legal framework to confront internal revolutionary warfare.³

Events in the capital soon reinforced the urgency of those debates. On 21 July 1964, an accidental explosion in a Buenos Aires apartment exposed the existence of the Armed Forces of the National Revolution (FARN), a clandestine organization combining Trotskyist ideology with revolutionary Peronism. The blast, caused by improvised explosives, revealed plans to establish a rural guerrilla foco in the province of Tucumán. Once again, insurgency appeared not as abstraction but as preparation.

It was against this backdrop that General Juan Carlos Onganía, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, addressed the Fifth Conference of American Armies at West Point on 6 August 1964. His message was unambiguous: the struggle against communism and internal subversion constituted core missions of the Army. The timing was not accidental. The guerrilla movements of 1964 furnished precisely the empirical evidence that advocates of the national security doctrine required. For President Illia, they were an unwelcome complication. For the Armed Forces, they were confirmation.⁴

The military's contribution to national development was in line with the Civic Action of the Armed Forces, and General Onganía emphasized this point:

In Latin America there are vast regions whose pace of development has been slow; moreover, within each national territory coexist centers equipped with all the advances of modern life alongside deficient areas lacking roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, power plants, docks, drainage systems, and other works essential for social coexistence.

It is precisely in conducting these tasks that the Armed Forces play a predominant role, closing ranks with their people and collaborating silently where labor and capital are lacking.

Civic–military cooperation, by contributing decisively to the provision of a minimal regional infrastructure, becomes, moreover, an essential engine of national development. In this sense, the military organization, in its civic-action function, possesses a broad horizon, since its efforts are aimed

³ Díaz Bessone, R. G. *Guerra Revolucionaria en la Argentina (1959-1978)*. Buenos Aires: editorial Fraterna, 1986, pp. 88-101.

⁴ Novaro, M. *Historia de la Argentina 1955-2010*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2010, p. 71.

at providing the community with some basic element for the satisfaction of its general needs.⁵

Rising concern over internal subversion compelled the Illia government to seek a formal recalibration of Argentina's defense framework. On 11 September 1964, the executive submitted a draft National Defense Law to the Chamber of Senators.⁶ The proposal advanced a broadened conception of national defense—one that fused security with development, treated internal subversion as a strategic threat rather than a policing problem, and defined coordinated roles for both the Armed Forces and civilian institutions in confronting revolutionary warfare.

Yet the initiative stalled. The draft never progressed beyond the Senate Defense Committee and was not brought before the full Congress. The paralysis was telling. While the nature of the threat was evolving, the political system proved incapable of adapting its legal and institutional architecture at the same pace.

The strategic environment, however, did not pause. The Cold War imposed simultaneous political, military, social, and economic pressures. Communist revolutionary warfare was no longer confined to distant theaters, and Argentina's own internal security situation was deteriorating. These conditions demanded comprehensive preparation—doctrinal, institutional, and operational—by both the state and its Armed Forces.

It was within this context that President Illia's foreign and defense policies converged. Lacking domestic consensus for sweeping legislative reform, the government turned outward, structuring an implicit policy of strategic knowledge

⁵ Ministerio de Defensa (República Argentina). *Antecedentes legales y parlamentarios 1944-1986*, versión en CD, ob. cit., p. 91. In the original Spanish:

Hay en América latina extensas regiones cuyo ritmo de desarrollo ha sido lento; además, coexisten en cada territorio nacional, centros provistos de todos los adelantos de la vida moderna, con zonas deficitarias donde faltan caminos, puentes, escuelas, hospitales, usinas eléctricas, embarcaderos, desagües y obras necesarias para la convivencia social.

Es, precisamente, en la ejecución de estos trabajos, donde las Fuerzas Armadas desempeñan preponderante papel, estrechando filas con su pueblo, colaborando silenciosamente allí donde faltan brazos y capitales...

La colaboración cívico-militar al contribuir decisivamente en la dotación de una infraestructura zonal mínima, se convierte, además, en motor esencial del desarrollo nacional. En tal sentido, el organismo militar, en función de acción cívica, posee un horizonte amplio, toda vez que su acción está orientada para dotar a la colectividad, de algún elemento básico para la satisfacción de sus necesidades generales.

⁶ Ministerio de Defensa (República Argentina). *Antecedentes legales y parlamentarios 1944-1986*, versión en CD, ob. cit., pp. 96-112.

transfer. By observing conflicts already in progress, Argentina could acquire lessons without first paying the full domestic cost of trial and error. The dispatch of Argentine Air Force Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear to the Republic of Vietnam in 1964 constituted a concrete expression of that logic: an effort to extract usable insights from a distant war that, in form if not geography, increasingly resembled Argentina's own emerging security dilemma.

The Republic of Vietnam in 1964

Since mid-1954, following the end of the Indochina War and the withdrawal of France, Vietnam had existed as a divided country, cleaved along the 17th Parallel. To the south stood the Republic of Vietnam, governed from Saigon and aligned with the Western, capitalist world. To the north stood the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, ruled from Hanoi and firmly embedded within the communist bloc. The division was geographic, ideological, and strategic—and it proved anything but stable.

South Vietnam entered 1964 politically fragile. The overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem on 1 November 1963 triggered a cycle of instability marked by short-lived governments and recurrent coups. On 30 January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh seized power, restoring a measure of order but not durability. Authority in Saigon remained contested, provisional, and vulnerable.

North Vietnam, by contrast, presented the image of cohesion and continuity. Ho Chi Minh had presided over the regime since 1945, supported by a disciplined revolutionary elite that included Pham Van Dong, Le Duc Tho, Le Duan, and General Vo Nguyen Giap—the architect of France's defeat in Indochina. Hanoi's leadership enjoyed ideological unity, institutional permanence, and a long-term strategic horizon.

The imbalance extended beyond politics to the battlefield. Since late 1960, South Vietnam had faced a sustained insurgency waged by the National Liberation Front—the Vietcong—directed, supplied, and reinforced by the communist regime in the north. The Vietcong operated across both rural and urban terrain, combining agitation, propaganda, and psychological intimidation with guerrilla warfare, terrorism, ambushes, and sabotage. It was a comprehensive campaign aimed less at military victory than at political erosion.

To counter this threat, the Armed Forces of South Vietnam were trained in counterinsurgency by US military advisers present since the final years of the Eisenhower administration, with assistance expanded under President John F. Kennedy. Even so, the Republic of Vietnam remained trapped in a multidimensional conflict—military, political, and psychological—fought simultaneously against an internal enemy and an external patron.

For the United States, the stakes were strategic. The survival of South Vietnam was central to the policy of containing communism in Southeast Asia, a cornerstone of the Domino Theory. Vietnam was not an isolated contest; it was a test case. Its outcome would signal whether revolutionary warfare could redraw the map of the Cold War—incrementally, asymmetrically, and without a formal declaration of war.

The pivotal moment came with the Gulf of Tonkin Incident on 4 August 1964. North Vietnamese torpedo boats were alleged to have attacked the US Navy destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* while they operated in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. Whatever the ambiguity surrounding the encounter, its political effect was unmistakable. The incident furnished President Lyndon B. Johnson with the necessary justification to authorize direct American intervention in Vietnam.

With that decision, the conflict crossed a threshold. What had been an advisory and proxy struggle became an overt war, culminating in the large-scale US military commitment that defined the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1975. Tonkin transformed Vietnam from a contested periphery of the Cold War into one of its central battlefields—an inflection point that framed the environment into which foreign observers, including Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear, would soon arrive).

Mission of Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear to the Republic of Vietnam (October 3–November 20, 1964)

By Decree No. 7014 of 8 September 1964, the Argentine government designated Air Force Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear and Embassy Counselor Francisco María Figueroa de la Vega as official observers to the Republic of Vietnam. Their task was to examine, on the ground, the pacification and reconstruction campaign underway in a country already deep in revolutionary war.

Argentina's acceptance of South Vietnam's formal invitation was neither incidental nor symbolic. The mission, planned to last approximately sixty days, was deliberately divided along functional lines. De Alvear was charged with analyzing military operations, doctrine, and organization, while Figueroa de la Vega focused on political, economic, and social conditions. Together, their reports were intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of a conflict whose structure, if not its geography, bore increasing relevance to Argentina's own security challenges.

The pacification and reconstruction effort in South Vietnam unfolded in the shadow of two wars: the recently concluded Indochina War against France (1946–1954) and an ongoing revolutionary insurgency supported from the north. For Argentine planners, Vietnam offered a living laboratory in which counterinsurgency, civic action, psychological warfare, and external intervention converged. The lessons drawn there promised practical value for Argentina's broader Cold War preparedness.

De Alvear was a particularly apt choice for such an assignment. Born in Buenos Aires on 9 January 1924, he entered the Military Aviation College in 1944 and graduated as an ensign the following year. A transport pilot by specialization, he brought with him recent international operational experience, having led an Argentine Air Force delegation to the United Nations Mission in the Congo between July 1962 and January 1963. At the time of his appointment to Vietnam, he served at the Command and Staff School as head of the Advanced Course and director of studies—positions that placed him at the nexus of doctrine, education, and institutional reform. He arrived in Vietnam not merely to observe, but to translate experience into instruction.

Comodore de Alvear departed for the Republic of Vietnam on 23 September 1964 and arrived ten days later at Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon.⁷ He remained in country until 20 November, observing a conflict already in motion and on the verge of escalation. His stay coincided with a critical interval—after the collapse of South Vietnam’s political stability, yet before the full weight of American military intervention transformed the war.

During this period, de Alvear examined the conflict in its essential dimensions: strategic vision and political purpose; guerrilla warfare and counter guerrilla operations; psychological warfare; the training and education of military personnel; doctrinal and operational organization; and, crucially, the relevance of Vietnam’s experience to Argentina’s own security challenges. His observations were comprehensive by design, intended to capture not isolated tactics but the logic of a new kind of war.

For de Alvear, the struggle in South Vietnam could not be dismissed as a distant regional conflict. It was a battle fought squarely within the global framework of the Cold War. In that contest, neutrality was not a stable position but an illusion.⁸ The Cold War, he concluded, was not confined to defined theaters or declared fronts; its battles—Vietnam foremost among them—implicated every nation, whether directly engaged or not.

Southeast Asia represented one of the outermost lines of resistance in the broader effort to contain communism. The Vietnamese, by force of geography, stood on what de Alvear and his contemporaries regarded as the forward edge of the free world. This was the front line of an undeclared, global conflict—a “third world

⁷ Archivo General de la Fuerza Aérea Argentina. Legajo Personal del comodoro Carlos Torcuato de Alvear.

⁸ Mensaje del ministro de relaciones exteriores Zavala Ortiz ante el Congreso Nacional (1964): *Tal vez sea una de las circunstancias más imperiosas en la preocupación de los gobiernos, la internacionalización de los problemas nacionales. La soledad internacional ha dejado de existir.* En: Fraga, R. *La Política Exterior Argentina. A través de los Mensajes Presidenciales al Congreso. 1854-2001.* Buenos Aires: CARI-CEPE, 2003, pp. 516-517.

war” fought through insurgency, subversion, and proxy struggle rather than massed armies.⁹ A communist victory there would not merely redraw the map of Southeast Asia; it would shift the line of confrontation outward, toward new regions and new continents.

In 1964, South Vietnam embodied the defining characteristics of revolutionary war. Conventional military criteria proved inadequate. There were no fixed fronts, no clear rear areas, and no decisive battles in the classical sense.¹⁰ The conflict was fluid, ambiguous, and relentlessly adaptive, demanding flexibility, speed, and institutional learning. It was precisely this type of war—political as much as military—that de Alvear believed would shape future conflicts, including those Argentina might soon face at home.¹¹

In South Vietnam, security and development were not parallel endeavors; they were inseparable. Economic and social policy operated as instruments of security, and security operations, in turn, shaped the prospects for development. This logic placed the civic action of the Armed Forces at the center of the pacification and reconstruction effort. Fighting and building proceeded simultaneously. While Vietcong units were being hunted, factories, schools, roads, and bridges were being constructed. Hunger and illiteracy were treated not merely as social problems, but as vulnerabilities exploitable by insurgents. Civilian labor worked alongside military engineers, reinforcing the premise that counterinsurgency was waged as much through legitimacy as through force.¹²

According to Commodore de Alvear, guerrilla warfare was the most likely form of future conflict. The Vietcong exemplified its defining characteristics. Their attacks were rapid, brief, violent, and silent. They struck without warning and vanished just as quickly, restoring the appearance of normality almost immediately after the assault.

⁹ Alvear, C. T. de. “Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam”. En: *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 17.

¹⁰ *La guerra en Viet-Nam se burla de todo lo convencionalmente establecido respecto de los conflictos bélicos. El enemigo no avanza según una línea más o menos definida, ni puede predecirse de dónde vendrá el próximo ataque. Estamos tan lejos de la campaña del Marne, de la línea Maginot y hasta de la “blitzkrieg” alemana, como de las adargas y rodelas. O quizás no: es muy probable que en este momento y en esta guerra, andemos más cerca de la ballesta y de la macana que de la bomba nuclear.* Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965, p. 167.

¹¹ Un mayor de la Fuerza Aérea de Vietnam del Sur comentó que: *En esta clase de guerra nunca se puede decir en forma definitiva si este o aquel es el mejor armamento o el mejor material. Todo cambia velozmente: una táctica de combate que da buenos resultados hoy, puede ser un fracaso el año que viene, dentro de un mes, o de quince días.* Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ibídem, p. 182.

¹² En esa línea, un ministro de Vietnam del Sur describió el sistema de la “mancha de aceite”: *las fuerzas armadas llegan a un punto cualquiera y establecen una zona de seguridad. Inmediatamente detrás va nuestro personal para realizar su trabajo. Y la primitiva y pequeña zona de seguridad, como una gota de aceite sobre una hoja de papel, comienza a extenderse.* Alvear, C. T. de *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ibídem., p. 69.

This was not warfare aimed at decisive engagement, but attrition—designed to exhaust, unsettle, and delegitimize rather than to conquer territory through frontal battle.

Central to this method was the guerrillas' ability to dissolve into the population. They blended seamlessly into rural villages and urban neighborhoods alike, transforming civilians into camouflage. Operationally, they owned the night. By day they rested or resumed ordinary civilian routines; by night they attacked. The aphorism repeated throughout South Vietnam captured the asymmetry succinctly: "the day belongs to the Government, and the night belongs to the Vietcong." Sustaining this effort were two intangible but decisive assets—revolutionary faith and an unshakable belief in ultimate victory.¹³

Vietcong operations spanned a wide spectrum: ambushes, sabotage, terrorism, strikes, and public agitation.¹⁴ Kidnapping served multiple purposes—financing, intimidation, political revenge, propaganda, and psychological warfare. Each action was executed discreetly and reinforced by an extensive information and intelligence apparatus. Violence was never isolated; it was always communicative. Every act sought not only to damage physical targets but to shape perception, erode authority, and remind the population—constantly and invisibly—who could strike at will.

The attack on Bien Hoa Air Base on 1 November 1964 was emblematic of Vietcong operational doctrine. The choice of date—the anniversary of President Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow—lent the strike symbolic precision. The execution was equally deliberate: a nocturnal, surprise mortar attack; brief, concentrated violence; immediate dislocation of order; and rapid withdrawal without trace.

The effect was disproportionate to the means employed. Chaos and confusion followed the initial impact. The attackers vanished before any effective response could be mounted, leaving security forces unable to identify, pursue, or punish those responsible. Defensive measures proved inert, and the government's retaliatory capacity dissolved into impotence. Within hours, calm returned to the base—an eerie normalcy masking the depth of the breach.

For de Alvear, Bien Hoa illustrated the essence of modern insurgency. The operation achieved tactical success, psychological shock, and symbolic resonance simultaneously. It demonstrated how a disciplined guerrilla force could strike a hardened military target, impose strategic embarrassment, and escape untouched—

¹³ *El guerrillero comunista es por sobre todas las cosas, un fanático. Cree en el partido y en la sabiduría de sus líderes con verdadera fe religiosa. No se pregunta por qué. No se queja, no discute, no razona, no investiga, no analiza.* Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ibídem, p. 253.

¹⁴ Los sabotajes y las huelgas podían paralizar un país al afectar sus servicios de agua, luz, gas, teléfono, etc. A través de dichas actividades, el Vietcong podía lograr, con escasos recursos, iguales o mayores efectos que los provocados por un bombardeo aéreo en gran escala.

leaving behind not only physical damage, but a lingering sense of vulnerability that no immediate countermeasure could erase. According to Commodore de Alvear:

From a strictly military point of view, it was a work of art. Those who planned and executed it knew exactly what they were doing and demonstrated extraordinary professional efficiency. They had to secretly carry their mortars, disassembled piece by piece, to assemble them at the chosen site—perhaps inside a hut, to fire later through an opening in the roof; or in an underground shelter; or inside a hollow tree. They must have spent days and days aiming their weapons, adjusting and correcting until they achieved the perfection they sought. Without ranging shots, at night, with no possibility of correcting their aim after the first rounds, they hit the target with absolute precision . . . ¹⁵

Vietcong infiltration into South Vietnam operated across land, river, and sea, exploiting terrain and civilian traffic with calculated precision. Along rivers and coastal waters, guerrillas moved concealed among fishermen and commercial transport vessels, using sampans as both camouflage and conveyance. The Mekong Delta, with its swamps, dense tributaries, and countless small boats, became a natural sanctuary—a logistical hub in which insurgents blended seamlessly into the rhythms of daily life. Its geography rendered search and interdiction operations by South Vietnamese forces and police not only difficult, but relentlessly draining.

On the western frontier, the problem deepened. The long, porous borders with Laos and Cambodia, covered by jungle and rugged highlands, offered ideal corridors for infiltration. Terrain did the work of concealment, while the indifference—or complicity—of neighboring governments removed political obstacles. The result was strategic permeability: a war fought within South Vietnam but sustained well beyond its borders.

¹⁵ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 207-208. In the original Spanish:

Desde un punto de vista estrictamente militar, fue una obra de arte. Quienes lo planificaron y lo llevaron a la práctica sabían lo que hacían y demostraron una extraordinaria eficiencia profesional. Debieron llevar secretamente sus morteros desarmados, pieza por pieza, para montarlos en el emplazamiento elegido: quizá dentro de una choza, para disparar luego por una abertura en el techo; o en un abrigo subterráneo; o dentro de un árbol hueco. Habrán estado apuntando sus armas durante días y días, afinando y corrigiendo, hasta lograr la perfección que buscaban. Sin tiro de reglaje, de noche, sin posibilidad de corregir la puntería después de los primeros disparos, dieron en el blanco con absoluta precisión...

Supporting this mobility was a logistical and communications system of remarkable breadth and discipline. The Vietcong maintained an integrated network that spanned North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, threading through jungles and mountains with efficiency born of long preparation. At its core lay the Ho Chi Minh Trail—not a single route, but an evolving web of pathways whose branches fed men, weapons, and supplies into the southern battlefield.

Beneath the surface, the system continued. Extensive tunnel networks provided concealment, rest, command posts, and launch points for attacks. These subterranean structures expanded continuously and were meticulously interconnected, functioning as both sanctuary and maneuver space.¹⁶ Like the Ho Chi Minh Trail above ground, the tunnels formed a critical pillar of insurgent resilience.

The infrastructure was comprehensive. Support and transit bases facilitated movement and training; workshops produced weapons and ammunition; and a tightly coordinated information and intelligence apparatus bound the entire system together. This was not improvisation. It was an integrated, multinational insurgent architecture—complex, adaptive, and designed to sustain a protracted war of attrition against a conventionally superior opponent.

Among the principal instruments of counterinsurgency warfare was the strategy commonly described as “emptying the river.”¹⁷ Its premise was stark: guerrillas survive only so long as they remain embedded within the population. By separating insurgents from urban centers—and, above all, from rural villages—the state could sever access to food, intelligence, shelter, and recruits. Deprived of that environment, the guerrillas would be left exposed, like fish stranded when the tide recedes.¹⁸

This logic underpinned the “new life villages” program, a cornerstone of South Vietnam’s pacification and reconstruction effort. These settlements were not merely defensive enclaves designed to protect civilians. They were offensive instruments. Established precisely where insurgents had drawn strength, they aimed to dislocate the Vietcong from their primary sanctuary—the peasant population—by denying concealment, restricting mobility, and reasserting state presence at the village level.¹⁹ The concept was not novel. It echoed the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya (1948–1960), where population control and political legitimacy proved decisive against guerrilla forces.

Complementing population-focused measures were two indispensable capabilities: a robust information and intelligence apparatus, and the capacity to infiltrate opera-

¹⁶ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 219.

¹⁷ En respuesta a la metáfora de Mao Tsé Tung: “el guerrillero era el pez, y la población era el río”.

¹⁸ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 88.

¹⁹ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 95.

tives into insurgent ranks. The latter was particularly perilous, demanding highly trained personnel capable of surviving prolonged exposure within hostile networks. Yet without penetration of the enemy's internal structure, counterinsurgency remained reactive and incomplete.

De Alvear drew a sobering conclusion from these observations. Tactical success in South Vietnam would remain elusive so long as the Vietcong's true bases of support remained intact. Those bases lay beyond South Vietnam itself—in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. To strike them would require expanding the conflict geographically, transforming a contained insurgency into a broader regional war. Victory, in other words, carried the inherent risk of escalation. It was a strategic dilemma with no clean resolution—one that underscored the limits of counterinsurgency when political constraints forbid decisive action against external sanctuaries.²⁰

Psychological warfare stood at the center of the conflict in South Vietnam. It was directed primarily at the civilian population, and its objective was not territorial conquest but cognitive domination—the capture of minds rather than ground. In this arena, perception became the decisive battlefield.

Its methods were varied and insidious: propaganda, disinformation, slander, infiltration, disguise, and rumor. Unlike conventional combat, psychological warfare did not seek the physical destruction of the adversary. Its purpose was conversion. Individuals subjected to its pressure were not eliminated; they were absorbed. The aim was not to remove pieces from the board, but to make them change sides.

Such warfare demanded a distinct operational logic. It tolerated no rigidity and allowed no routine. Because it operated on belief, fear, and expectation, psychological warfare required constant adaptation to shifting attitudes and circumstances. Success depended less on firepower than on agility, credibility, and narrative control—attributes far more difficult to impose than to lose:

In psychological warfare there can be no routine procedures. When the struggle is for the conquest of human minds, one must always be ready to change course abruptly to adapt to the fluctuations of the thought one seeks to dominate. The true battlefield is the mind of the individual. More

²⁰ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 224-225. Señalaba que *quienes enfrentan un problema de guerrillas parecen condenados a mantenerse a la defensiva. Y la defensa, como actitud permanente, nunca dio buenos resultados en la guerra* (p. 224).

than for territories, the fight is for consciences. Once consciences are conquered, territories will follow as a matter of course.²¹

Preparation for psychological warfare was not optional; it was decisive. Without it, meaningful defense was nearly impossible. A society untrained in this domain risked defeat without a single bomb falling on its cities—conquered not by force of arms, but by the erosion of will, legitimacy, and cohesion.²²

What unfolded in Vietnam illustrated this reality with unsettling clarity. Psychological warfare there was not an auxiliary tactic but a central line of effort, fully integrated into the broader conflict. It fit seamlessly within the Cold War's comprehensive logic, where victory increasingly depended on shaping perceptions, exploiting social fractures, and neutralizing opponents without recourse to overt annihilation. In this form of struggle, collapse could precede combat—and surrender arrive without battle:

This Third World conflagration is of a very special character. It is much more political than military, and above all it concerns social and economic problems. War is no longer “the continuation of politics by other means,” but rather a complex conglomerate of economic, social, military, and political issues, whose management requires profound knowledge of psychology—because psychology has become the preeminent science of warfare.²³

Psychological warfare was among the Vietcong's most effective weapons. Its objective was not simply to harass the state, but to hollow it out from within. Vietcong operatives worked systematically to erode the foundations of the Republic of Vietnam by discrediting democracy as a form of governance, undermining the legitimacy and prestige of the administration, and exploiting nationalist sentiment to portray the

²¹ Alvear, C. T. de. “Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam”, ob. cit. En: *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 15. In the original Spanish:

En la guerra psicológica no puede haber procedimientos de rutina. Cuando se lucha por la conquista de mentes humanas, hay que estar siempre dispuesto a cambiar bruscamente de rumbo para amoldarse a las fluctuaciones del pensamiento que se desea dominar. El verdadero campo de batalla es la mente del individuo. Más que por territorios, se lucha por conciencias. Conquistadas las conciencias, los territorios vendrán por añadidura.

²² Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 30.

²³ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 258. In the original Spanish:

Esta tercera conflagración mundial es de carácter especialísimo. Es mucho más política que militar e interesan en ella, más que ninguna otra cosa, los problemas sociales y económicos. La guerra no es ya “la continuación de la política por otros medios”, sino un complejo conglomerado de asuntos económicos, sociales, militares y políticos, cuyo manejo requiere profundos conocimientos de psicología, porque la psicología ha pasado a ser la ciencia bélica por excelencia.

government as foreign, corrupt, or imposed. The target was confidence—once that collapsed, authority would follow.²⁴

De Alvear recognized that such methods were not unique to Vietnam. Psychological action succeeds by exploiting a society's internal fault lines. He had seen this firsthand in the Congo, where tribal divisions became instruments of political manipulation during his service with the United Nations mission between 1962 and 1963. Argentina, too, was not immune. The attempt by the Armed Forces of the National Revolution (FARN) to establish a rural guerrilla foco in Tucumán, drawing support from sugarcane workers organized under the FOTIA union, illustrated how labor structures could be mobilized for insurgent ends.

To counter the Vietcong's psychological offensive, South Vietnam created a dedicated institutional apparatus. The Joint Committee of the Central Directorate of Psychological Warfare, supported by the Armed Forces' own Directorate of Psychological Warfare, coordinated efforts to contest insurgent narratives and reassert state legitimacy.

The aim of this psychological action was explicit: to secure the support and goodwill of the civilian population and to rebuild confidence in the nation's military institutions. As one South Vietnamese general observed with disarming clarity, modern wars are no longer won by armies alone. They are won by nations—by societies willing to support their forces and to endure sacrifice. In Vietnam, as de Alvear understood, the battle for popular allegiance was not secondary to combat operations. It was the war's central contest.²⁵

Psychological warfare was directed not only at the civilian population, but also at the insurgents themselves. South Vietnamese forces sought to fracture Vietcong morale, disrupt internal cohesion, and induce defections. To that end, the Directorate of Psychological Warfare employed aircraft to overfly contested areas, dispersing leaflets designed to weaken guerrilla resolve, encourage desertion, and prompt local populations to withdraw cooperation from insurgent elements.

Education emerged as a parallel line of effort. De Alvear observed that psychological warfare could not be countered by an ill-prepared society, nor could a war of ideas be won by illiterate soldiers.²⁶ Strengthening national education therefore

²⁴ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 249. La acción psicológica se aplicaba sobre *todo aquello susceptible de un mínimo de razonamiento*; por otra parte, *los atacados casi nunca saben que lo son. Eso hace que no comprendan la necesidad de defenderse. Un disparo de fusil puede no dar en el blanco; pero las palabras siempre llegan al cerebro* (Alvear, C. T. de. "Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam", ob. cit., *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 16).

²⁵ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 83.

²⁶ Alvear, C. T. de. "Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam", ob. cit. En: *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 16.

became a strategic necessity rather than a social accessory. In this framework, the Ministry of Defense assumed a role that extended beyond force employment to institutional development, recognizing that human capital was itself a security asset.

These insights translated into concrete proposals. The possibility of exchanging personnel between Argentine and South Vietnamese military institutions was actively discussed. A South Vietnamese Army officer inquired whether Argentina offered scholarships to foreign students—an opening that de Alvear regarded as an opportunity rather than a courtesy. South Vietnam’s hard-won experience in counterinsurgency warfare, he argued, constituted a body of practical knowledge from which Argentina could profit.²⁷

The exchange logic extended beyond conventional forces. Training for counterinsurgency naturally included Argentina’s National Gendarmerie, whose operational profile closely resembled the requirements of such warfare. In conversation with a South Vietnamese Air Force major, de Alvear described the Gendarmerie’s successful operations against the People’s Guerrilla Army in northwestern Argentina and highlighted its experience in border security, anti-smuggling missions, and jungle terrain. The response was immediate and telling: “Wouldn’t it be good if some of them came to work with us? They would give us a hand and expand their operational capability.”²⁸

During his stay, Commodore de Alvear visited South Vietnam’s principal military education institutions—the Military Academy, Naval School, Military Aviation School, and the Command and General Staff Academy. What struck him immediately was the depth of US influence on the training and professional formation of South Vietnamese officers. This influence was not abstract. Graduates of the Naval and Military Aviation Schools routinely completed advanced training with units of the US Seventh Fleet and at American military bases, embedding US operational concepts directly into South Vietnam’s force structure.

Vietnam, in de Alvear’s assessment, functioned as a living laboratory. Operational concepts, tactical techniques, and combat doctrines were not merely taught; they were tested, revised, and retested under combat conditions. One doctrinal conclusion stood out with particular clarity: counterinsurgency demanded the unification of military resources under a single command structure.²⁹ Fragmentation—whether institutional or operational—was fatal in a war defined by speed, ambiguity, and dispersion.

This requirement gave rise to the organization of small, integrated air-ground units. These were not conventional Army formations supplemented by air support.

²⁷ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 14.

²⁸ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 179.

²⁹ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 211.

They were composite units with a single commander, composed of air and ground elements fused into an indivisible whole. Aircraft, assault vehicles, paratroopers, infantry, engineers, helicopters, and supporting personnel operated as a unified system, capable of rapid deployment to any point in the theater. In guerrilla warfare, where the enemy appeared and vanished with equal speed, such integration was not a luxury—it was a necessity.

An American adviser underscored this lesson succinctly, noting that South Vietnamese forces had learned the decisive importance of *aerocooperation*: the fusion of air and ground components within a single operational entity rather than their coordination across institutional boundaries.³⁰

De Alvear carried this insight home. Drawing directly from the Vietnamese experience, he proposed that Argentina develop a comparable military construct—one in which all available means could operate *like the fingers of a hand*: coordinated, responsive to a single brain, and capable of forming a fist. Such a unit, he argued, would possess the ability to seize terrain securely, strike with precision, and respond with speed to emerging threats. The metaphor was deliberate. Modern warfare, he concluded, rewarded not mass alone, but integration, agility, and unity of command.³¹

Among the military instruments employed in South Vietnam, helicopters emerged as decisive. Their value lay not in a single function, but in their versatility. Rotary-wing aircraft performed troop transport, command movement, escort missions, search and rescue for downed aircrews, medical evacuation, reconnaissance, cargo delivery, airstrip preparation, recovery of damaged aircraft, and—when necessary—the destruction of materiel fallen into enemy hands. In counterinsurgency, this flexibility translated directly into operational relevance.

Guerrilla warfare imposed a tyranny of speed. Vietcong units appeared suddenly and vanished just as quickly, compressing the window for response to minutes rather than hours. Helicopters provided the only reliable means of deploying forces rapidly and precisely to the point of contact. They could fly at low altitude to evade detection, land in confined or unimproved areas, and operate under adverse weather conditions. In a war without fronts, vertical mobility replaced territorial depth.

Helicopters also enabled functions beyond combat. They conducted defoliation missions to deny concealment, evacuated wounded personnel with embedded medical teams capable of operating day or night, and lifted casualties directly from contested terrain using hoists and basket stretchers.³² Some aircraft were equipped

³⁰ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 181.

³¹ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 211-212.

³² Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 119.

with electric saws to clear landing zones on demand—an illustration of how terrain itself became a variable to be shaped rather than endured.

Heavy-lift capabilities further expanded operational reach. The US Air Force employed Sikorsky H-37 helicopters to transport oversized loads, including disabled rotary-wing aircraft, and to conduct recovery operations for helicopters shot down or forced to land in hostile territory. These assets sustained the air-ground system by preventing losses from becoming permanent.

At the tactical level, Sikorsky H-34 helicopters typically operated in pairs, with one aircraft escorting the other to provide immediate assistance in case of damage or emergency. Each carried a pilot, copilot, and observer—the latter maintaining continuous communication with ground forces and adjacent aircraft. The helicopter's machine gun, detachable and usable both in flight and on the ground, reflected the blurred boundary between air and surface combat in counterinsurgency operations.

De Alvear took a particular interest in the logistical and operational employment of these assets. To that end, he conducted a flight to the Tay Ninh area aboard a South Vietnamese Air Force H-34, observing firsthand how rotary-wing aviation functioned as the connective tissue of modern counterinsurgency warfare. The lesson was unmistakable: in this kind of war, control of the vertical dimension was not supplementary to ground operations—it was foundational.

The operational profile of the Vietcong, combined with Vietnam's unforgiving geography, rendered classical patrol and reconnaissance methods largely inadequate. The country's elongated terrain—dense jungles, mountainous regions, an intricate river system, and an extensive coastline—favored concealment, dispersion, and infiltration. Under such conditions, locating the enemy proved more difficult than engaging him. Even so, South Vietnamese and allied forces persisted through the triad of intelligence, patrolling, and reconnaissance, seeking to map infiltration routes, identify support bases, and interdict supply lines.

These realities transformed the conflict into a true intelligence war. Success depended less on firepower than on information—its accuracy, speed, and dissemination. The insurgents understood this well. The Vietcong maintained a disciplined and highly effective intelligence network that often rivaled, and at times surpassed, that of the state. As one South Vietnamese Air Force major emphasized to de Alvear, the decisive task was not striking the target, but finding it—and keeping it under observation. Without that, tactical superiority dissolved into irrelevance.³³

De Alvear's field observations reinforced this conclusion. He visited the major air bases at Da Nang and Bien Hoa, where he examined facilities used by US

³³ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 180.

Special Forces advising South Vietnamese units. At Bien Hoa, he conducted an observation flight with US personnel aboard a Bell helicopter over the Cam Ranh coastal region, noting its stability and smoothness—qualities that enhanced endurance and situational awareness during extended operations.³⁴ He also met with General Nguyen Cao Ky, commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force and a rising political figure, with whom he discussed professional matters ranging from flight equipment and personnel training to operational doctrine.

These engagements unfolded against a clear diplomatic backdrop. The Argentine government had rejected neutrality in the East–West conflict and adopted a policy of opposition to the global expansion of communism. Collaboration with the United States followed naturally from that stance. Argentina was accordingly counted among the free-world nations to which South Vietnam appealed for support in its struggle against insurgency and subversion. De Alvear’s mission thus reflected not only professional curiosity, but a broader strategic alignment—one that treated Vietnam’s war as relevant to Argentina’s own security future.

When asked by a South Vietnamese journalist what form of assistance Argentina might offer, Embassy Counselor Francisco María Figueroa de la Vega responded with deliberate clarity. Speaking personally, he stated that he was inclined to support any effort directed against communism.³⁵ The answer was neither evasive nor diplomatic. It reflected Argentina’s broader alignment in the Cold War and underscored that sympathy for South Vietnam was rooted in strategic conviction rather than opportunism.

De Alvear himself viewed the mission with equal realism. He acknowledged that Argentina’s presence in Vietnam was not politically neutral—and could not be. The arrival of the first South American observers carried symbolic weight, and with it, risk. As he noted pointedly, “It could not be denied that our presence in Vietnam had a certain political character, and it was not improbable that the communists might want to make an example of the two first South American observers to arrive in the country.”³⁶ The remark was more than anecdotal. It captured a central truth of Cold War conflict: even ostensibly technical or observational missions were inseparable from politics. To be present was already to have chosen a side.

³⁴ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 205.

³⁵ Con motivo del inicio del Operativo Ayacucho (diciembre de 1964), el presidente Illia expresó: *La participación argentina en el Operativo Ayacucho reafirmaba la solidaridad del país con las obligaciones interamericanas y representaba la determinación argentina de enfrentar, aquí y donde sea, la agresión marxista contra la dignidad, la libertad y la esperanza por una vida superior para nuestro pueblo*. Cisneros, A. y Escudé, C. *Historia General de las Relaciones Exteriores de la República Argentina*, parte III, tomo XIII. Buenos Aires: CARI-Nuevohacer (Grupo Editor Latinoamericano), 2000 (versión en CD).

³⁶ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 75.

As for the positioning of the South Vietnamese conflict in relation to the Argentine Republic, the Commodore observed that:

Helping the Vietnamese in their struggle is helping ourselves. Today they stand on the most distant frontier of democracy, on the first line of battle. Behind that line are all the countries of the free world, Argentina included. The communists have now committed a large part of their resources to Southeast Asia. They are making extraordinary efforts to conquer it, and if they succeed, they will be in a position to concentrate on new objectives—one of which, and not the least important, is undoubtedly South America.

Do the Vietnamese deserve to be helped?

Personally, I believe so, but in reality it does not matter whether they deserve it or not. What matters is that we need them to triumph. And alone they will never achieve it. Should we remain with our arms crossed, indifferent to the problem, without collaborating even morally?

Are we interested in increasing the fighting capacity of that first line, behind which we now stand?

Or would it be preferable to wait passively until it is our turn to become the first line?³⁷

³⁷ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 260-262. In the original Spanish:

Ayudar a los vietnamitas en su lucha es ayudarnos a nosotros mismos. Ellos están hoy en la más lejana frontera de la democracia, en una primera línea de batalla. Detrás de esa línea se encuentran todos los países del mundo libre, la Argentina inclusive. Los comunistas tienen hoy gran parte de sus medios empeñados en el sudeste asiático. Están realizando esfuerzos extraordinarios por conquistarlo y, si lo logran, estarían en condiciones de concentrarse en nuevos objetivos, uno de los cuales—y no de los menos importantes—es sin duda Sudamérica.

¿Merecen los vietnamitas que se los ayude?

Personalmente, creo que sí, pero en realidad no interesa saber si lo merecen o no. Lo positivo es que necesitamos que triunfen. Y solos jamás lo lograrían.

¿Debemos seguir de brazos cruzados, ajenos al problema, sin colaborar ni siquiera moralmente?

¿Nos interesa incrementar la capacidad de lucha de esa primera línea, en cuya retaguardia estamos por ahora?

¿O será preferible esperar pasivamente a que nos toque ser a nuestra vez primera línea?

Comodore de Alvear unequivocally supported Argentina's participation in the global strategy of containing communism. Yet his reading of the conflict in South Vietnam departed from purely military analysis. He regarded the armed struggle as secondary—a consequence rather than a cause. The decisive contest, in his view, lay in political legitimacy, social cohesion, and institutional preparedness.

From Vietnam, he drew a sobering inference: the most probable future war Argentina might face would resemble the one unfolding in Southeast Asia. It would not begin with conventional invasion or declared hostilities, but with subversion, infiltration, and psychological warfare. Crucially, de Alvear believed that Argentina still possessed a margin of time. If appropriate measures were adopted and preparation for this new form of conflict undertaken early, the country might prevent such a struggle from reaching its armed phase.

Recent events at home sharpened that conviction. The brief but revealing episode of the People's Guerrilla Army in Salta—its Cuban connections and rapid defeat—served as an early warning rather than a reassurance. For de Alvear, it underscored both the reality of the threat and the imperative of preemption: to confront revolutionary warfare before it matured into sustained insurgency.

His conclusions resonated within the broader climate of the Armed Forces. As historian Marcos Novaro observed, "Within the Armed Forces, a virulent anticommunism was gaining ground, convinced that the clash between the two world blocs would have countries like Argentina as its epicenter. The insurgent and repressive escalation in Indochina and North Africa from the mid-decade seemed to confirm this hypothesis."³⁸

Following de Alvear's return to Argentina on 20 November 1964, the national government did not alter its posture toward the conflict in South Vietnam. Alignment endured. In early 1966, Argentine Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Zavala Ortiz traveled to Saigon, a visit that functioned less as diplomacy than as signal—a deliberate affirmation of support for United States policy in Southeast Asia.³⁹

By that point, the conflict had crossed from proxy to open war. The United States had initiated direct military intervention on 8 March 1965, and the Vietnam War was fully underway. Argentina's continued engagement, modest in scale but clear in intent, reflected a strategic choice: to remain aligned with the Western coalition in what was increasingly understood as a decisive theater of the Cold War rather than to retreat into rhetorical neutrality.

³⁸ Novaro, M. *Historia de la Argentina 1955-2010*, ob. cit., p. 80.

³⁹ Sáenz Quesada, M. 1966. *De Illia a Onganía. El preludio de la Argentina violenta*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2023, pp. 56-57.

Conclusion

The mission to the Republic of Vietnam placed Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear inside a live theater of communist revolutionary warfare and subversion. There, he observed not only the mechanics of insurgency, but the full spectrum of political, economic, social, and military responses marshaled to counter it and to sustain a fragile process of pacification and reconstruction. These observations unfolded within the unmistakable framework of the global East–West struggle.

From this vantage point, de Alvear articulated a strategic vision that extended beyond Vietnam itself. He consistently emphasized the conflict's relevance to Argentina's own security environment and warned against treating Southeast Asia as a distant or detached concern. His purpose was explicit: to anchor Argentina firmly within the Cold War's global geometry and to reinforce the country's commitment to collaboration in the broader effort to contain communism.

In the military domain, his analysis focused on performance under conditions of subversion and guerrilla warfare. He underscored the centrality of civic action by the Armed Forces, the operational logic of counterinsurgency struggle, the decisive role of psychological warfare, and the necessity of educating and preparing military personnel for conflicts in which legitimacy and perception mattered as much as firepower. These themes did not remain theoretical. Elements closely aligned with de Alvear's observations later found expression in National Defense Law No. 16,970, approved on 6 October 1966.⁴⁰

His contributions endured within Argentina's professional military education system. The lessons he drew from Vietnam—particularly regarding guerrilla warfare and psychological operations—were incorporated into curricula, debated in staff colleges, and subjected to sustained analysis. In this sense, de Alvear's mission functioned not merely as observation, but as transmission: translating a distant war into doctrinal insight with lasting influence on Argentine defense thought.

Doctrinally and operationally, de Alvear argued for the reorganization of military force around a unified, integrated structure, modeled on the air–ground units he had observed in Vietnam. Fragmentation, he concluded, was incompatible with counterinsurgency. Unity of command and rapid integration of capabilities were essential. In this context, he placed particular emphasis on helicopters as indispensable instruments of modern irregular warfare—a judgment that the Vietnam War would soon confirm beyond doubt.

⁴⁰ Ministerio de Defensa (República Argentina). *Antecedentes legales y parlamentarios 1944–1986*, versión en CD, ob. cit., pp. 113–121.

Argentina's subsequent procurement decisions reflected this lesson. Within a few years of de Alvear's mission, the Argentine Air Force incorporated rotary-wing platforms suited to counterinsurgency operations, including the Bell UH-1D and the improved UH-1H Iroquois in 1967, followed by the Hughes 369 HM in 1969. These acquisitions signaled not merely modernization, but adaptation to a new operational reality. De Alvear also underscored the central role of information and intelligence, recognizing that in insurgent warfare, awareness preceded action—and often determined its success.

The logic of knowledge transfer extended to personnel. Argentina expanded the exchange of officers and specialists for training in counterinsurgency warfare, sending military personnel to courses conducted by the Armed Forces of the United States. These efforts were reinforced by advisory missions from both the United States and France, embedding foreign operational experience into Argentina's evolving defense posture.

Taken together, these outcomes capture the significance of de Alvear's mission. He returned not with abstract impressions, but with a coherent body of lessons drawn from a conflict already reshaping the nature of war. Those lessons—organizational, technological, and doctrinal—offered Argentina tools to strengthen national security and to refine its development and defense policies within the volatile and uncertain landscape of the Cold War. 🦅

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