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2-2-2015

### Nguyen Khac Huynh [Vietnam, Diplomat]

Nguyen Khac Huynh

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Interviewee: **NGUYEN KHAC HUYNH**

Interviewer: Minh Pham

Date: 2 February 2015

Location: Hanoi, Vietnam

0:00:21

Minh

Hello sir. I'm honoured and glad to have the chance to discuss with you today the fight against the French invasion, from your experience of twenty years in the military, and fifty-two years being a diplomat, a writer, and a professor at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. I'll start by asking you, what were the ideas you had at the age of seventeen to eighteen, when you joined the Viet Minh?

0:00:52

Huynh

I came from a poor family, in the countryside, but I was lucky. Because I was good at school, I was sent to Hue to study, with a scholarship from the French government back then. I was from a poor family, but my father was educated, knowledgeable. So, from very young, I had the spirit of patriotism instilled in me, very young. When I was studying in Hue National School, I asked my close friends to come together and write articles about patriotism, under the reign of colonialism. Very young, and those articles were secret, secretly passed on among students. From a very young age, I was aware of national independence, patriotism, freedom for the people, from a very young age. Why did I participate so early? It was because of the patriotic spirit that had been fostered in me since school-going age. In particular, when I was in school, I had a teacher. His name was Doan Nong. He joined the revolution, with me later on. He also taught me about patriotism, and he helped me with writing patriotic articles from the early years. I started writing the articles when I was only sixteen.

Once the Viet Minh came to my hometown, I managed to contact friends, who also had the intention to join the Viet Minh, and I joined the Viet Minh from the early days. The exact time I joined was February or March 1945. I quit school and quit vocational training to join Viet Minh. I was assigned to be the assistant to a revolutionary leader. He was the president of the district's Viet Minh Front, the revolutionary organisation of the district, and also the president of the province's revolutionary organisation. I became his assistant at an early age; still in my teens. That was my most vivid memory of participating in the revolution. I wasn't a Communist party member then. I was a Viet Minh, I was in the Viet Minh. Afterwards, when I was learning the rules in the army, that was when I joined the Communist party, September 1946. I am about to receive a medal for having served seventy years in the Party. Actually, I joined the revolution some eighty years ago now.

When Uncle Ho declared independence, I was at home in Quang Tri province, being the province president's assistant. I had to find a way to listen to the declaration in Hanoi. I ran

across the town of Quang Tri, to ask if anyone had a radio. In the whole town of thousands of residents, there was only one radio, only one, and I found it. I found the radio to connect to the capital city. Luckily, I managed to tune in. That was the first achievement, the first contribution to disseminate the Declaration of Independence, from Hanoi to Quang Tri. Nowadays radios are everywhere, but back then, a radio was rare to find, and very valuable. So, it was the hand of fate that brought me to it. I was so happy. For a normal citizen to understand – one must be in that situation to understand – the situation of oppressive exploitation imposed on us. Everywhere we went, we were beaten by the French, and were called "cyclo". They called us "cyclo" (pedal-taxi driver). Only such sentiments could make one comprehend how precious independence was. Invaluable. At that time, that was why thousands of young men and women were willing to sacrifice their lives to fight against the French. They were willing to fight for independence, for freedom. Nothing is more precious than that. That was the first period, the first emotions when I heard the Declaration of Independence. After the Declaration, I immediately thought, "What to do now? Now that we're independent, what am I to do?" My first idea was to fight the enemy.

0:05:30

[Minh](#)

Let's talk about leadership, at any age, at any level of management. In your view, when you joined the army, when you joined the Viet Minh, at the age of seventeen, eighteen, when you joined the army, how did you view leadership, when you were eighteen, when you were twenty?

0:06:00

[Huynh](#)

It's strange. Leadership is a broad concept. I have read articles about different types of leadership. Each profession, a different type of leadership. When you teach, it's a different kind of leadership. When you are a soldier, it's a different kind of leadership.

Leadership, first and foremost, is our thinking, our mind. So, leadership, when I was in the army was finding out how to be good in the military - how to work, how to fight in the best way. That was my first thought when I was among other military folks. For twenty years that was my thinking, for twenty years when I was a soldier.

0:06:47

[Minh](#)

Knowing that the Vietnamese army was not as strong as the French army at that time, how did that leadership mindset help you in realising that it would be a long-term fight, with a much strong opponent?

0:07:18

[Huynh](#)

I immediately saw that it would be difficult. Apparently, the French were stronger than us. Not just stronger but overwhelming us. They were stronger by a thousand times, not by a hundred times. We had no big guns, no tanks, no artillery. Yet they used aircraft, battleships and tanks against us. We had nothing. So, I knew right then, it would be difficult, arduous. Because I had the thinking, from the start, I was aware that the fight would be long and hard. So, the leadership idea, the awareness at that time was to see that everything would be tough, and it would take a long time. The mindset of the leaders, and of myself, through all those ten years, was that it would be a long grueling fight. That was always in our mind, in our leadership thinking.

0:08:20

[Minh](#)

When the battle of Dien Bien Phu began, when you... when the Vietnamese army started facing the French army in Dien Bien Phu, after fighting for fifty-six days, after three months, or more, what were your thoughts when the French surrendered? Did you think that day would come for Hanoi, for Vietnam?

0:08:53

[Huynh](#)

We had a characteristic in Vietnamese army, in the fight with the French, and later with the Americans. When we were fighting, we all knew that we would win. Definitely would win, albeit all the hardships. At the time we couldn't know it would take ten years, or fifteen years. We didn't think about that. We just knew for sure that it would take a long time. A long fight, but definitely a victorious fight. So, when our army organised for the battle of Dien Bien Phu, all my brothers in the General Staff Office, as well as all other brothers that I met, even normal soldiers and normal people, we all knew that our attack at Dien Bien Phu would definitely be a win. Even though the French had challenged us to attack. "Challenge however you want, and you'll see one day, you'll see how your challenge is nothing."

In my mind, although I didn't personally fight at Dien Bien Phu, considering the overall situation, the concentration of our forces there, I thought that we were determined to win, and we were going to win. There was no other outcome. The soldiers who came to surround Dien Bien Phu, the workers who transported cartridges and rice uphill to Dien Bien Phu, they all knew we would win. That's why they were willing to sacrifice their lives. When you don't want to win, when you don't see that you can win, you won't sacrifice everything. You will hesitate. But here, they were determined, because they were certain about victory. That was certain, and I myself also had the thought that victory was certain.

0:10:27

[Minh](#)

You joined the delegation to negotiate in Paris with the Americans, in the late 1960s. What was your thought when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs chose you as a member of the delegation? What leadership thinking do you think they based their selection on?

0:10:52

[Huynh](#)

Our army opened fire in Saigon. The first day of Lunar New Year. Thousands of people in the North were excited about the news of the fight in Saigon. In the morning of the next day, I was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh convened the four of us and said, "You should prepare. It's about time to start negotiations." I stuck with the Paris Negotiation for more than ten years, more than ten years for the negotiations. From the start of the negotiation to the end, to the completion of the book, I lost ten years.

Fighting the Americans was a big task, very big, very difficult. On the battlefield, at the negotiation table, and on the international front. Difficult, why? Vietnam was a weak and poor country. The country was split, with only the North being free. Our arsenal was humble, our force weak, without aircraft, without tanks, without battleships. We negotiated with the Americans. You should know that the US (United States) had a very powerful diplomatic system. They had hundreds of ambassadors, professionally trained, very good ambassadors. Meanwhile, our own diplomacy had just been established, and we had to confront the American diplomacy. Our army had to confront the vigorous American forces. So, it was extremely difficult. At the beginning of the negotiation, we already knew it would be difficult.

Let me give you some examples. The first thing we requested from the US was that the US should not enter the South. The South was ours. The South belonged to the people of South Vietnam. The North was ours. Why did you come and bomb our North? So, starting the negotiation, the first thing we did was to request two things: First, the US army must stop bombing the North. Second, they must withdraw from the South.

0:13:10

[Minh](#)

Unconditionally?

0:13:12

[Huynh](#)

Unconditionally. Our two requests were reasonable. Bombing our country, an independent country. Why did you come to bomb us out of nowhere? Was anyone bombing the US at all? Yet you came bombing us. You must withdraw your army from the South. You must stop bombing the North. Without any reason, you sent troops to the South of Vietnam, you invaded the South of Vietnam. That was how we argued, we pointed out what was right for us, to inundate them.

However, there was no way they would listen to what we said, nor would they agree. They said, "Yes, now you are aiding the Viet Cong in the South. Now if you stop the supply, we will stop bombing the North."

As for the second request for the US to withdraw their army from the South, what did they ask for in return? The US said, "Now, the US troops entering the South. Yes, they were outside forces, so it was not acceptable. But then your Northern troops entering the South were also outside forces. So, the two outside forces should both withdraw. The US army should withdraw, the Northern army should also withdraw. That's fair, isn't it?" That's fair, the American way. So, what to do now? We kept on arguing, day after day. You withdraw, I withdraw. You don't withdraw, I don't withdraw. So on and so forth, we kept on arguing.

In the end, I proposed that, Nguyen Khac Huynh proposed that, we should make a case for a civil war in the South. The Americans had no reason not to withdraw. Regarding the Northern forces involved in the South, it was a Vietnamese force. So, the way in which Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam would resolve the conflict should be left for those forces to decide. The conflict between Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam, in general, all forces in the South, including the Northern army, would be resolved by Vietnamese parties, and the US would have no say in that. They should not get involved in that because the US was an outsider, outside force. Vietnamese forces in the South would resolve the conflict on their own.

That claim was a tactical success that swayed the US to stop insisting our force withdraw. That was the business of Vietnamese parties only. Yes, the purpose of our claim was to refute the argument that both sides had to withdraw. Very well done, and the world had to acknowledge that we had a very strong argument. The division issue, the Vietnamese army issue, the Vietnamese army and the people, will be left for the Vietnamese to resolve. So that was how we argued.

Eventually, the US saw that they couldn't hold on any longer. They had to withdraw and accept our line. But they changed one thing, "The two Vietnamese armed forces in the South of Vietnam are to resolve the conflict on their own", meaning it was between the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), or the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) to be exact, and Saigon, without any involvement of the US. So, we were successful in swaying the US to withdraw their involvement in Vietnam's affairs. They had to acquiesce to the Vietnamese army staying, the Northern Vietnamese army, staying in the South. That was a great diplomatic success for us. We were very weak, and yet we managed to keep our troops in the South, while the Americans had to leave. That was the greatest success in the initial process of diplomatic negotiations.

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[Minh](#)

As far as I understand, you had a long time, twenty years in the artillery, twenty-two years in the military.

0:17:07

Huynh

Military.

0:17:08

Minh

Diplomacy... and your time as a lecturer, a teacher. Through the three settings, what did you think about leadership during each period, and what were the areas that required leadership during each period?

0:17:32

Huynh

Whether in military, in diplomacy, or in education, proper leadership is always a must, as everyone relies on the leaders as guides. Leadership includes these factors: First, to have a proper evaluation of the circumstances. When fighting the French, we evaluated their strengths, as well as their weaknesses. The Americans also had their own strengths and weaknesses. We must be able to see those. When we see the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, we see our advantages and disadvantages. That's evaluating the circumstances.

Second, to have a proper policy. That's very important. The second factor of leadership is proper policies. If Vietnam had followed a "short-term war" policy, fighting to win battles, we could have lost to the US. We had to make it a "long-term war", so that the American troops got tired and the American people started protesting, making the enemy weaker. That's why Vietnam's fight against the US had to be so long.

Third, the third factor of leadership is techniques and methods. Having a proper policy is one thing, but proper policies cannot create forces themselves. There had to be methods to implement the policy. How to mobilise people? How to mobilise forces? In any discipline, there are forces working. In education, we also need a force. In military, we also need a force. How to organise the forces to achieve our goal? So, there are three factors. First, proper evaluation of circumstances. Second, proper policies. Third, the force to ensure implementation, action.

0:19:15

Minh

When you talk about mobilisation of the people by leadership, do you think that sometimes we know, we grasp the situation, but sometimes we don't, sometimes our confidence is not as strong as other times. In times that we lacked confidence, we didn't understand, or didn't firmly grasp the situation, how did we mobilise the people?

0:19:46

Huynh

All of that happens in life. That's the art of leadership. Mobilising the people, it's an art. What art is in that? When you intend something, when you calculate for something to happen, you must have three options. They called me Mr "Three-option Huynh". Why, because when somebody asks me a question, I'll reply "There are three options." What are the three options? The first option, the best option, is calculating so as to meet the highest requirements. If we can't get the best option, we'll try to get the medium option. And the minimum option is the last that we opt for. It's still favourable for us, but at the minimal level possible. Three options.

For instance, we requested the Americans to withdraw. After the negotiation they agreed to withdraw, let's see how long it would take them to do so. We wanted them to leave as fast as possible, within ten days to a month. We proposed that option, that the US army would leave within ten to fifteen days, to thirty days, a month. We knew that they wouldn't agree to that. Tens of thousands of soldiers could not possibly withdraw in a month. So then we proposed two months, or sixty days. We also prepared for the option of three months, or ninety days, within which the American troops would be gone. We kept fighting for the one-month option first, to no avail. Then Mr Le Duc Tho said, "Alright, considering your situation, we would provide you with our support. We would clear the roads, and make more roads, and we would give orders to our forces in the South to stop fighting with the Americans, so your troops can withdraw conveniently."

Eventually we agreed on the sixty-day option. In the Accords, it was stated that withdrawal was to be complete within sixty days. They did accordingly, exactly sixty days after the date of signing. So that was the second option. We didn't use the third option. That's the way to calculate, because you don't always get what you want.

0:21:53

Minh

If I take it from there and look forward to the future, regarding the issue, the aspect of leadership, then how could we know who is the real friend, and who is the real enemy?

0:21:12

Huynh

A very smart question, and difficult to answer. Now, is the US still an enemy of Vietnam? Is France still an enemy of Vietnam? Who is the enemy of Vietnam? It's very difficult, very difficult. But it requires our leaders to be able to differentiate, to calculate, to consider possibilities. Whether to be outspoken about that or not is one thing, but in the minds of our leaders, they have to know. Even if they don't talk about that, "You're my enemy, but I don't necessarily declare it". Behave, to find an appropriate way to behave toward whoever that is possibly harmful to our independence and sovereignty.



The leader must have I mentioned three attributes: first, a grasp of the situation; second, a proper policy; three, methods to implement that policy. So, the first one is to analyse, to grasp the situation means to analyse. Analyse what is going to happen next? The leader must be able to see what is going to happen. What possibilities, and among the possibilities, what is the worst-case scenario. All of that needs analysis. A leader that doesn't know how to calculate for possibilities is a bad leader. A good leader knows how to calculate and analyse which possibilities are likely to happen. And when it happens, how to react. [*thế nào đây*]

0:23:48

[Minh](#)

So that's the kind of leadership that you want in the future, and in the present, for Vietnam?

0:23:54

[Huynh](#)

In the present, in the future, forever, it must always be like that. We have to calculate for five years, ten years in the future. If we only look at one or two years in the future, it won't do. We must calculate for longer term.

0:24:10

[Minh](#)

If you had a brief or advice for young leaders in the future, or advice for your children, in terms of leadership, what would you say to them?

0:24:34

[Huynh](#)

I am just a normal official. I don't dare advise anyone, nor lecture anyone. I just want to express my wish that the leader be someone who, first, can stay current. Catch up with the current issues. Time has changed, the world has progressed, don't hold on to old things. Catch up with the current events. A leader who doesn't stay current will lag behind very soon, lag behind.

Second, the leader is someone, who is able to predict all possibilities. Short-term, medium-term, and long-term possibilities. Evaluate all possibilities. This year, the economy has been improving, good harvests, but still we have to look at the possibilities of poor harvests, or the economy going south, or oil prices increasing, then what are we to do? All the possibilities must be considered and analysed, including the worst-case scenarios. Whoever is good at assessing, and analysing is the winner. They must have foresight. The leader must have a vision.

I'm not lecturing any leader here. But here is my wish. Leaders must stay current. The world has moved on, we must also move on. Don't hold on to things that we tried to pursue

thirty or forty years ago. The circumstances have changed now. Second, assess the possibilities in the short term, medium term, and long term. Assess thoroughly, do things to the end.

0:26:14

[Minh](#)

I sincerely thank you for sharing your experiences with us, as well as with our future generations. Thank you very much.

0:26:24

[Huynh](#)

Alright, I also thank you, Minh, for organising this meeting. I wish all of your success. You all have worked hard.

0:26:33

[Minh](#)

Thank you.