

The System of Strategic Defense Facilities along the Bassac River Belonged to Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1859)



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ABSTRACT: Bassac river was an important arterial river in the Nguyen dynasty's defensive policy in the Southwestern frontier region in the early nineteenth century. As a result, the Nguyen dynasty attempted to create a significant strategic defense base system of interconnected nature that extended from the frontier to the interior. This article focuses on clarifying the strategic military base system along the Bassac river path, which flows through the Southwestern provinces and had numerous key strongholds to ensure the Nguyen dynasty's national security from 1802 to 1859.

KEYWORDS: Nguyen dynasty, Bassac river, defense system, Southwestern.

1. INTRODUCTION

The strategic waterways of the Mekong river system always had an important role in the defensive posture as well as promoting the Vietnam's defense resources in the first half of the nineteenth century under the Nguyen dynasty's defense policy in the southern border region. The Mekong river system, which included two major tributaries of the Mekong and Bassac rivers, dominated the Nguyen dynasty's defense ideals in creating strategic military stations throughout the early exploration, protection, and development of the Southwestern region of Vietnam. While the defensive base system along the Mekong river path was critical in connecting the defense systems of Dinh Tuong, Vinh Long, and An Giang, the Bassac river, position was close to the delta and stretches from Chenla to Vietnam, had become a crucial waterway in terms of defense control (Trinh Hoai Duc, 2005). The Nguyen dynasty constructed a strategic defensive base system along the Bassac river waterway, from the border precinct to the river's end near the South China Sea. During the period 1802-1859, the defensive base system along the Bassac river combined with the defense along the Mekong river (belonged to Mekong river system) to form a solid defense and security posture in the Southwest region under the Nguyen dynasty.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

We used a variety of research methods to explore this topic, including document collection method, historical criticism method, historical method combined with logical method. We apply each research method in each stage with various roles in the process of completing the topic. The document collection method was applied from the stage of topic selection, research orientation, content production, and throughout the research process. Through this, we can learn, refer to, and grasp in previously published documents which has relevant content in order to consider, select, and inherit to serve the research process about the strategic defense base system along the Bassac river route during the Nguyen dynasty in the period 1802-1859.

The method of historical criticism was used to classify the collected historical sources as direct or indirect historical documents, which allows us to restore and properly perceive issues related to the Nguyen dynasty's system of military defense bases strategy along the Bassac river route from 1802 to 1859. This method actively assists us in determining the legitimacy, background, era, and authorship of historical documents. This allows us to assess the historical content's accuracy and objectivity in order to rebuild the whole image of the Nguyen dynasty's strategic defense base system along the Bassac river route during this time period.

To grasp historical concerns in detail, the historical method mixed with the logical method was employed throughout the process of carrying out this research, specifically in the birth, development, and end; in a certain situation, area, and time. As a result, we are able to provide analysis, judgment, assessment, and generalization of the problem's historical process through historical sources in order to contribute to the complete restoration of the system of military defense bases strategy along the Bassac river route during the Nguyen dynasty in the period 1802-1859. From there, we elucidate the relationship between this system and the defensive posture of the southern frontier during the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1859). These are the two primary methods for implementing this issue. To ensure the scientific and historical study perspective of the subject, we strive to apply the aforesaid approaches in a reasonable manner in the topic.

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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The system of frontline defense facilities was located in the north of the Bassac river line

The Bassac river was an important defense line parallel to the Mekong river defense line, with a network of interconnected vital defense facilities spanning from the border to the interior in the 19th century. The Nguyen dynasty re-planned critical defense positions while also developing and reinforcing defense facilities based on the previous period's military stations. Recognizing the significance and decisiveness of the Bassac river surface for the entire military system of the Southwest region, the Nguyen dynasty eventually created a network of bases running from the border to the south. The defense line along the Bassac river was considered the backbone of the defense area on the Southwestern border, with a vital defense base system including:

The cluster of defense works close to the border are 5 military facilities in front of Chau Doc including Da Phuc, Binh Di, Binh Thien, Trung Khoan and Can Thang posts. These were defensive facilities with a very critical role and position, "the picture close to the enemy's land... are important places" (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007f, p.984). In these forward defense facilities, the Da Phuc post "located on the left and right bank of the Bassac river, near the citadel of An Giang province" was considered a pharyngeal defensive position, an important place, so the Nguyen dynasty always emphasized the "must guard with heart" (Cabinet of the Nguyen dynasty, 1993, p. 407). During the Vietnam-Siamese War (1841-1845), this was proved.

Meanwhile, Binh Di post was created in the first year of Thieu Tri (1841) as a base for intelligence collection and defense in a critical border location. Binh Di post was made up of two defensive bases: the left side has a circumference of 36 zhang and a height of 8 meters; the right side had a circumference of 24 zhang and a height of 9 meters. Because of the importance of the Binh Di post, the Nguyen dynasty deployed 100 troops to garrison here in 1847 (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p.221); (Cabinet of the Nguyen dynasty, 1993, p. 408).

Binh Thien post was located in Tay Xuyen district of An Giang province, near a big lagoon known as "Bung Binh Thien", on the upstream side of the Bassac river. Binh Thien post was located at the pharynx, the gateway to Chau Doc, so it was very important for national defense and security of Nguyen dynasty. The Nguyen dynasty dispatched 154 troops to stand vigil. The Nguyen dynasty did not drop to 100 guard troops until 1847, when the border situation had calmed down (Cabinet of the Nguyen dynasty, 1993, p. 408).

Besides, Can Thang post was established in 1844 in the Tay Xuyen district of An Giang province and had a circumference of 66 zhang. Because this was the "adjacent place" to Chenla, the Nguyen dynasty sent 30 troops to patrol the border and "take of information gathering" (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p.221); (Cabinet of the Nguyen dynasty, 1993, p. 408).

In addition, Trung Khoan post was established in the Tay Xuyen district of An Giang province but the writer cannot find any documents indicating which year it was founded. According to Dai Nam Thuc Luc, this post was stated in 1844, and it was possible that Trung Khoan was built about the same time as Can Thang due to the urgent requirements of defense work and against the enemy during the height of the Vietnam-Siam War. The proof was that in 1844, the Nguyen dynasty sent General Nguyen Van Hoang to bring 1,000 marines to Da Phuc, Trung Khoan post and "walk around the whole area to control the unexpected." (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007f, p.571). Based on the actual situation, King Thieu Tri appointed 37 troops to protect the Trung Khoan post in 1847, but subsequently ordered them to be demolished.

Behind the cluster of five defense sites indicated above was the Chau Doc area, a geo-strategic location in the defense of the Southwest region and the beginning point of the Vinh Te canal. With an important position "no less than Bac Thanh" (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p.946) of Chau Doc, the Nguyen dynasty spent a lot of time and effort building military and defense facilities in this area to meet the requirements of this key position in the southwestern border strategy (Nguyen Quang Ngoc, 2017, p. 259). The Nguyen dynasty built various military buildings here in order to establish a defense base for the frontier strip stretching from Tan Chau to Ha Tien.

Chau Doc stronghold was a significant military structure built in this location in the 15th year of Gia Long (1816). The governor of Vinh Thanh Luu Phuoc Tuong built this stronghold with a total of 7,000 militiamen (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, pp.917-941). Its length from front to back was 162 zhang. Height was 7 feet. Its legs had a thickness of 6 inches, the top was less than 5 meters. It had two steps, the back was in the direction of Kien (Northwest), the front was in the direction of Ton (Southeast), the right side was adjacent to a large river, surrounded by a moat 20 meters wide, 11 meters deep with 3 gates on the left, right and behind, in front of the Bassac river. There was a military residence and a storeroom in the stronghold (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p.216). This was considered the largest defense facility on the southwestern border before the citadel of An Giang province was built under the Nguyen dynasty.

When the Chau Doc stronghold was constructed in 1817, the Nguyen dynasty ordered the Governor of Gia Dinh citadel to collect 100 troops from four cities (Phien An, Dinh Tuong, Vinh Thanh and Ha Tien), 500 soldiers from Uy Vien post, and a skilled commander to defend here. Soldiers were rotated every three months-while commanders were rotated every a year, according to Nguyen dynasty laws. In addition, the Nguyen dynasty sent 40 cast iron guns and ammunition to be placed in Chau Doc stronghold so to strictly guard (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p.946).

In terms of location, Chau Doc stronghold was horizontally opposite Tan Chau post on the Mekong river, 32.5 miles to the

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east, 203 miles to the west of Ha Tien town, and 244.5 miles to the north of Phnom Penh citadel (Chenla). With that geostrategic location, the Nguyen dynasty designated Chau Doc stronghold as “an important border guard place” (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p.216). Chau Doc stronghold was considered a basic military base to defend the southwestern border, creating a strategic position to control Chenla as well as control waterways and land routes from Chenla to Vietnam (Duong The Hien, 2019).

Under Gia Long’s reign, beginning in 1817, the Nguyen dynasty ordered the Governor of Vinh Thanh to be stationed at Chau Doc stronghold, rather than Long Ho (Vinh Long city of Vinh Long province today), in order to quickly handle border matters. The Governor of Vinh Thanh tutelary mandarin, on the other hand, had to simultaneously occupy the office of “Protector of the national seal of Chenla” and handle Ha Tien’s “border affairs” in addition to stationing at Chau Doc stronghold (Lê Quang Đĩnh, 2005).

Furthermore, after repelling the Siamese invaders in 1834, the Chau Doc fort was severely destroyed. Therefore, the General Governor of An Giang-Ha Tien, Truong Minh Giang, and the Governor of An Giang, Le Dai Cuong, organized approximately 1,000 personnel to repair the damage. At the same time, they informed King Minh Mang of:

An Giang’s new citadel was yet to be erected. The troops of An Giang province was likewise forced to relocate to Chau Doc. This old citadel’s shape was too lengthy, so reduce a section to make it square with plans to add a cover to form a mansion in the future. The old citadel had the width of 60 zhang and the length of 140 zhang. Now we wanted to trim the length of more than 80 zhang to make four faces: front, back, left, and right. To make a square, they are all 60 feet long.

(National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007d, p.174)

With King Minh Mang’s approval, Chau Doc Fort was extensively repaired, opening the path for it to become the most important work in the southwestern frontier area, renamed citadel of An Giang province (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007g, p.178). An Giang province’s citadel was a vital military structure on the Vietnam’s southwestern frontier. The policy of establishing An Giang province in Long Son village west of the Mekong river was gradually abandoned following the Vietnam-Siam War (1833-1834). The Nguyen dynasty became increasingly conscious of Chau Doc’s function in the defensive posture on the southwestern border, so it decided to move the citadel of An Giang province from Long Son to Chau Doc on the west bank of the Bassac river.

The An Giang province citadel was built at Chau Doc to serve as the residence and command of the General Governor of An Giang - Ha Tien. The citadel of An Giang province had a circumference of 262 zhang. This citadel stood 9 meters tall, with three gates in front, on the left and right. Its exterior was bamboo-planted. The citadel’s four sides were dug 6 meters deep. Outside of this was the Ho Ha dike, which was 2 meters 7 inches high. (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, pp.192-193)

Chau Giang fort, located on the east side of the Bassac river, was another important military structure in the Chau Doc area. Chau Giang fort was repaired on the basis of the old Chau Doc headquarters, in the territory of Dong Xuyen district of An Giang province. Because Chau Giang post was located in a strategic location in the upper reaches of the Bassac river, it was frequently flooded. The new Chau Giang fort was built in the 17th year of Gia Long (1818) when King Gia Long commanded Nguyen Van Xuan to consider an appropriate location. After that, the king moved the old Chau Giang fort to the upstream area, a mile away from the old site. The new Chau Giang fort was built by land with squared. The face looks to the South with the width of 30 meters, the height of 6 meters and 5 inches, and a sincere heart of 12 meters thick.

Chau Giang fort was an important defense base that assisted Chau Doc fort in controlling the Bassac river. In 1834, the Nguyen dynasty increased the firepower of this post by arranging 31 cannons here (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007d, pp. 382-383). At the end of 1837, the Nguyen dynasty arranged 91 soldiers divided into 2 teams namely Chau Giang First and Second, then renamed the Chu Giang fort (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007e, p. 224). In the 3rd year of Thieu Tri (1843), the Nguyen dynasty abolished this fort (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p.217).

Beside Chau Giang fort, Nguyen dynasty also built Chau Giang post located at the lower gate of Vinh An canal. This post had a circumference of 28 zhang like a semicircle, in the territory of Dong Xuyen district of An Giang province. The troops of Chau Giang post were transferred from Tan Chau to An Lac forts to carry out the task of maintaining security (National History of Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p.220). The Nguyen dynasty erected eight cannons here in 1834 (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007d, p. 383). The Nguyen dynasty created Chu Phu (Chau Phu) post in 1834 on the right side of Chau Doc fort. After that, the Nguyen dynasty reinforced this fort with four cannons (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007d, p.383). In 1836, Chu Phu post was granted four sets of cannons by the Nguyen dynasty (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007d, p. 790). This was a very important satellite defense facility on the right of Chau Doc fort.

Therefore, during the climax of the Vietnam-Siamese War (1841-1845), in 1844, the Nguyen picked Chu Phu post as a temporary house for Chenla’s princesses including Ang Mey, Ang Sngon, and Ang Poeu, to avoid the threat of the Siamese army (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007f, p.587).

It could be said that the system of frontline defense facilities was located in the north of the Bassac river line had become an important highlight of the defensive posture in the Southwestern border region of the Nguyen dynasty. In the period 1802-1859, this system evolved into a unique defense department with an important command center at Chau Doc to oversee the defensive posture for both An Giang and Ha Tien territories as well as the protection of Chenla.

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3.2. The system of back-response defense facilities was located in the south of the Bassac river line

Along with the system of frontline defense bases in the north, the Nguyen dynasty established a system of strategic defensive facilities in the south of the Bassac river route. This was considered a great effort of the Nguyen dynasty to create a multi-layered, closely related defensive posture in the Bassac river in-route as well as with other strategic locations throughout the Southwest region to serve the national defense. This system of defensive facilities extends from the south of An Giang to the estuaries that empties into the South China Sea with many important bases.

In the territory of Dong Xuyen district, An Giang province, Thuan Tan river-post was reinforced by the Nguyen dynasty with the role of keeping security and preventing the enemy's advance at the intersection of Bassac river located at the western mouth of Vam Nao river. Thuan Tan river-post was built during Nguyen Anh's career recovery in An Giang (1789). From 1802, the Nguyen dynasty continued to use Thuan Tan river-post the 16th year of Minh Mang (1835) after the Vietnam-Siamese War (1833-1834), when it was demolished (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2006, p. 218).

The Nguyen dynasty established Dong Xuyen river-post to the south of Thuan Tan river-post, on the creek route west of Bassac river, in the jurisdiction of Tay Xuyen district, An Giang province. This river-post was established on An Giang land during Nguyen Anh's career (1789). It was converted to a tax collection agency in the 18th year of Minh Mang (1837) (Ta Chi Dai Truong, 2013). However, Dai Nam Thuc Luc stated at the end of 1837 that there was a Dong Xuyen river-post with a garrison of 21 men. (Nguyen dynasty National History, 2007e, p. 224)

In addition, Cuong Thang post was built by the Nguyen dynasty as a "key place to defend" located in the territory of Dong Xuyen district, An Giang province to the south of Dong Xuyen river-post. In 1834, the Nguyen Dynasty established the Cuong Thang river-post with 50 marines (Cabinet of Nguyen dynasty, 1993, pp. 406). In 1837, the Nguyen dynasty had 54 people stationed at Cuong Thang post, formerly called Cuong Thang river-post, now changed to Cuong Thang garrison (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007e, p. 224).

The Nguyen dynasty also built the Vinh Hung river-post in addition to the Cuong Thang river-post. This river-post was located on the creek route east of the Bassac river, in the territory of Dong Xuyen district, An Giang province, and was erected during the reign of Nguyen Anh on An Giang land (1789) until it was abandoned in the 16th year of Minh Mang (1835). (Nguyen dynasty National History, 2006, p.217).

Another important base was Tran Giang river-post located on the west bank of Can Tho river, in Phong Phu district, An Giang province. This river-post was built during Nguyen Anh's career on the land of An Giang (1789) to be compatible with the town of Tran Di (in Soc Trang). In the 16th year of Minh Mang (1835), the Nguyen dynasty ordered the demolition. (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007e, p. 218)

The Nguyen dynasty erected the Ba Xuyen citadel in the region of Phong Nhieu district, An Giang province, south of the Bassac river. This citadel, with the radius of 20 zhang and the height of 3 meters, was built in the 17th year of Minh Mang (1836). The earthen castle of Ba Xuyen had three gates and four sides encircled by trenches with administrative functions, taxes, and internal security. The Nguyen dynasty established two significant posts here to maintain the security of the area, which was populated by a high number of Khmer people: Uy Vien and Tra On.

Concerning the Uy Vien post, from 1787, Nguyen Anh sent Nguyen Van Ton to recruit several thousand Khmer people in the two lands of Tra Vinh and Man Thit, appointed as soldiers and named the Siamese soldiers post. Nguyen Anh ordered Nguyen Van Ton as a member of the squad to govern. In 1810, King Gia Long changed the name of the Siamese soldiers post to Uy Vien post (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, pp. 230, 802). Uy Vien post with the function of "remote duty" was considered as an important military supply place for the Southwestern border region and control Chenla. Also in 1810, King Gia Long sent Nguyen Van Ton to bring 1,000 Uy Vien post to Phnom Penh (National History of the Nguyen Dynasty, 2007a, p. 805). In 1816, King Gia Long sent 1,000 soldiers to the Uy Vien post to guard and build Chau Doc post in progress (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 917).

After Chau Doc post was built, King Gia Long sent 500 soldiers of Uy Vien post there to guard (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 946). In 1817, King Gia Long saw that Uy Vien post only had more than 300 soldiers and was not sent enough, so he allowed Nguyen Van Ton's son Nguyen Van Vi to recruit people to form three teams of Uy Vien first, second and third with more than 100 soldiers, added to the elite squad. King Gia Long then ordered Nguyen Van Ton to recruit 1 more elite army with 10 teams, 50 troops each (National History of Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 957). At that time, Uy Vien post had about 500 troops. In 1818, when King Gia Long repaired the Chau Doc fort, he mobilized 100 more troops from Uy Vien to assist (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 978). In 1819, King Gia Long sent 500 militiamen from Uy Vien garrison to Chau Doc to dig Vinh Te canal (National History of Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 997). During the two diggings of Vinh Te canal in 1822 and 1823, King Minh Mang continued to send militiamen from the Uy Vien garrison to participate but did not have a specific number (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007b, pp. 239, 260). King Minh Mang dispatched 450 soldiers from the Uy Vien garrison, led by General Nguyen Van Thoai, to guard Chau Doc in 1823 (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007b, p. 301). It can be argued that the Uy Vien post was highly essential in the military formation of the Southwest border region and the West citadel, as

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well as demonstrating the importance of Khmer ethnic soldiers in the army typically the father and son of generals Nguyen Van Ton and Nguyen Van Vi under the Nguyen dynasty. Concerning the Tra On post, this was an important garrison established by the Nguyen lord. Possibly, Tra On post was born before Uy Vien post (National History of Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 228). During the war with Tay Son, Tra On post was probably destroyed, so in 1802 King Gia Long allowed it to be re-established (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 536). However, I have not seen any reference documents about its future function. As expected, Tra On post was just a security post for the Khmer people and supports Uy Vien post. Because both posts were under the management of General Nguyen Van Ton's father and son (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007a, p. 536). Besides, on the north bank of Ba Xuyen river in Vinh Dinh district, An Giang province, the Nguyen dynasty built Tran Di river-post. This river-post was built during the reign of Nguyen Anh on the land of An Giang (1789). In the 18th year of Minh Mang (1837), it was changed into a tax collection agency, then abandoned (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007e, p. 217). On the South China Sea side, the Nguyen dynasty erected the My Thanh river-post in Vinh Dinh district, An Giang province. It was also a significant defense complex. My Thanh river-post had a gate of 40 meters wide, 1 to 9 meters deep at high tide, and 1 to 5 meters deep at low tide. In addition to the My Thanh river-post, the Nguyen dynasty established the My Thanh station in the west at the start of the Gia Long period, establishing the Thanh Hai squad to defend. This river-post was afterwards designated as the tax collection agency (National History of the Nguyen dynasty, 2007e, pp. 221, 222). Although not directly involved in border work, the defense facilities at the end of the Bassac river, had great effects in coordinating information, preventing the enemy from rearing up as well as cooperating in combat in blocking the retreat of the enemy. The system of strategic defense bases south of the Bassac river route has proven to be a strong reaction basis for the northern region. All have contributed to the formation of a firm defensive posture, which serves as a pivot for the Nguyen dynasty's defense work on the southern border region from 1802 to 1859.

4. CONCLUSION

Strategically, if the defense line on the Mekong river was critical to the Nguyen dynasty's defensive posture, the defense line on the Bassac river is critical to the defense system on the southern border region. With a system of military and defense facilities extending from the border to the South China Sea on the Bassac river route established by the Nguyen dynasty, it had created a strong defense foundation for the defense of the country. With the defensive base system "forefront-back" with "many floors, many layers" had created a strong connection in the defense posture of Vietnam on the southwestern border region. During the period 1802-1859, the Bassac river route became the most important pillar in the defense area on the southwestern border against traditional Southeast Asian adversaries. All had built the defense and command center for the entire Southwest defense system, making a major contribution to the defense of Vietnam's sovereignty, unification, and territorial integrity prior to French colonization.

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