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NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam

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SHORT-TERM PROSPECTS FOR VIETNAM

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The major judgments in this Estimate are:

A. Hanoi's actions are clearly designed to insure that it can again resort to major military action at some point to gain its objectives if other means fail. The chances of the communists gaining power through the political provisions of the Paris agreement are negligible; nor are their prospects good for achieving the GVN's collapse through a combination of political and clandestine warfare backed up by only moderate military pressure. Hanoi may not have made a final decision as to the timing of a major offensive. It must, however, believe that it will ultimately have to return to the battlefield to seek its objective of reunifying Vietnam. (Paras. 3, 54.)

B. The current military balance in South Vietnam is only slightly in favor of the GVN; with heavy infiltration and supply movements, it may have shifted to the communists' advantage by mid-1974. The political balance, however, is clearly in the GVN's favor and will remain so. (Paras. 6-19, 31-53.)

C. The forward positioning of communist forces and supplies and the improved road system give Hanoi the capability to kick off a

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major military campaign with little additional preparation, perhaps less than a month. (Paras. 13-15, 55.)

D. It is a close choice whether Hanoi will opt for a major military offensive during the current dry season (October 1973-May 1974). In making its decision Hanoi must assess the following factors:

- The likelihood and extent of a US response; the positions of Moscow and Peking, particularly the consequences to the North Vietnamese position if they can not be certain of enough material support to cover losses that would accompany prolonged heavy combat; the military balance between its forces and the RVNAF; and the overall political and military situation in the South. (Para. 56.)
- The arguments for and against an offensive this dry season are presented in paragraphs 57-64.¹

E. If there is not an offensive this dry season, Hanoi will continue to launch and no doubt accelerate carefully orchestrated significant localized, and limited-objective attacks in various regions of South Vietnam to seize territory and test the GVN's resolution. (Paras. 67-68.)

F. In the event of a major communist military effort this dry season, however, the communists would initially make substantial territorial gains in MR-1 where they would probably commit their own air assets. If the fighting were prolonged, RVNAF's continued resistance in MR-1 would be in doubt without renewed US air support. Communist gains in the rest of South Vietnam would be less dramatic, and RVNAF should be able to blunt the communist assault. (Paras. 44, 65-66.)

G. Beyond this dry season, we believe the odds favoring a major communist offensive will increase significantly in the following dry season. (Para. 76.)

- Over the long run, Hanoi may place greater weight on trends it observes in the South than on the external restraints imposed by Moscow, Peking, and Washington. (Paras. 69-75.)

¹The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, believes that the case postulated in favor of a North Vietnamese offensive in 1974, *earlier rather than later*, merits greater weight than the case against such an offensive. His arguments in support of this position are presented in his footnote on page 16.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The current situation in Vietnam is one of "less fire" rather than "cease fire", and there is no real peace. Both sides have initiated or provoked some of the fighting that has occurred since the January accords, primarily by attempting to seize or retake territory deemed strategic. In addition, the communists have replenished their southern forces, ignoring the Paris accords' strictures against personnel augmentation or equipment resupply beyond ICCS-supervised exchanges of used materiel. The communists have also engaged in a variety of activities such as road building which, while not technically a violation of the Paris agreement, enhance their military potential.

2. The ICCS has been ineffective in its peace-keeping functions. Nor is there reason to hope that the ICCS will be effective in coming months. Neither Vietnamese party will limit its actions solely because of the formal machinery of the Paris agreement. If anything, the ICCS became weaker with the withdrawal of Canada and the substitution of Iran. In essence, the governing factors for both

North and South Vietnam will remain what they have always been—the perception of both Vietnamese parties of the gains and risks involved in pursuing a course of action.

II. THE VIEW FROM HANOI

3. Hanoi has made it clear that it clings to its ultimate goal of uniting Vietnam under communism and will pursue this goal by whatever means possible. But in signing the Paris agreement, North Vietnam admitted that it then faced formidable constraints—military pressure had failed to crack ARVN's resolve and the communist position was growing weaker; the US would not dissolve its commitment to Saigon (indeed, the US response in 1972 was greater than Hanoi anticipated); Hanoi's Soviet and Chinese allies were anxious for détente with Washington; and the cumulative pressures of the war were creating stresses and war-weariness in North Vietnam itself. The North Vietnamese were thus forced to make major concessions in Paris—they had to retreat from their longstanding demand for Thieu's removal, the formation of a coalition government, and an end to US military assistance.

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4. Hanoi did not, however, leave Paris empty-handed. The cease-fire and bombing halt left communist forces in control of substantial, but largely unpopulated, areas in South Vietnam and allowed badly hurt units an opportunity to rest and refit. Politically, the PRG gained some aura of respectability. Military pressure on the North ceased, permitting renewed attention to reconstruction and development. And—most important—the agreement signaled the end of direct US military participation in the war.

A. Hanoi's Options

5. In weighing its strategy in the South, North Vietnam can choose from several courses of action.

- It can forego large-scale military operations and attempt to compete primarily through open political competition and clandestine warfare. Displays of military muscle would be designed primarily to protect communist personnel in the field.
- While keeping a lid on large-scale military operations, Hanoi can maintain a moderate level of main-force pressure to assess the capabilities and reactions of the other side. At the same time, it can continue to build up its forces toward the time when it might be feasible to renew all-out hostilities. Essentially, this is the course of action that Hanoi is now following.²
- Or, Hanoi can opt to renew offensive warfare on the scale of Tet 1968 or March 1972, either countrywide or in one or two military regions with lower levels of

² Neither of the above options necessarily excludes an occasional flare-up of more serious fighting. An integral aspect of both would be the build-up of the political and economic viability of the communist enclave in western South Vietnam.

action elsewhere. Such actions could be preceded by a gradual escalation of military pressure—rather than an abrupt series of major assaults—on the theory that such a course would minimize the chance of US intervention.

B. Factors Influencing Hanoi's Policy Decisions

North Vietnam's Internal Strengths and Weaknesses

6. Political leadership in North Vietnam is stable, cohesive, and unchallenged. From time to time, however, there are indications of public and private debate within the ruling hierarchy over basic issues, e.g., large-scale military attacks versus guerrilla warfare tactics, reconstruction of the North versus liberation of the South, and emphasis on political tactics versus military action. Even though rivalries and policy disputes may exist within the collegial apparatus that has ruled since Ho Chi Minh's death, they are masked by a public display of unity and an apparent willingness of the Politburo members to fall in line once decisions are made.³

7. Since the cease-fire, Hanoi has rebuilt and strengthened its internal military structure. The country's air defenses appear stronger than ever. Hanoi has replenished its fighter inventory by bringing most of its Mig-15s and Mig-17s home from China, is integrating Soviet SA-3 missiles into its air defense network around Hanoi, and has renovated, streamlined, and modernized its radar network. The navy also appears stronger as a result of the acquisition in late 1972 of Chi-

³ It is not possible to speculate meaningfully on the consequences of change by death or removal of one or more of Hanoi's leaders. But in the short run, we do not think it would make much difference.

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nese and Soviet gunboats, including KOMARs. The ground forces have been strengthened by the addition of new armor and artillery, although it is not clear when this materiel entered the North Vietnamese inventory.

8. There is evidence as well that North Vietnamese training programs have been tailored to correct the weaknesses in leadership, discipline and tactics that hampered its army throughout last year's offensive. According to North Vietnamese military journals, conventional warfare doctrine emphasizing the combined use of armor, artillery, and infantry forces is still being stressed. (Coordination between armor and infantry was markedly lacking in the March 1972 offensive.) As in previous years, the North Vietnamese conducted their fall military conscription campaign during August 1973. There is no doubt that North Vietnam has adequate manpower resources for maintaining a large standing army, and the number of men reaching draft age each year is more than sufficient for absorbing a continuing high rate of casualties if major military action were resumed.

9. Communist propaganda continues to list reconstruction as the nation's foremost priority. The bulk of North Vietnam's efforts to date, however, has gone into activities which serve both war-related and civilian needs.

10. In making its policy decisions, the regime might give some consideration—albeit minor—to popular attitudes. There is no evidence, however, of significant popular unrest or serious opposition to the government's policies. The populace would fear that renewed US bombing would accompany a major offensive. Such potential problems, however, could almost certainly be kept in bounds by the regime, particularly if external military aid were forthcoming.

The Communists' Position in the South

11. The communists failed to capture and hold any major population centers in the 1972 offensive, but did seize territory which they are turning into relatively secure base areas in which an extensive and heavily defended interlocking road system is being constructed. (See Figure 1.) The termination of American bombing has relieved most of the pressure on communist logistics and infiltration. Communist efforts at population resettlement and economic development in PRG areas will be some time (if ever) in reaching fruition, but the communists' western enclave already provides them a forward staging area for any future offensive.

12. Since the beginning of the year, North Vietnam has also substantially increased the capabilities of its forces in South Vietnam, notably so in MR-1. Although the GVN retains a substantial manpower advantage in the other military regions, in MR-1 the communists now have a rough parity of forces with ARVN. (See Figure 2.) Moreover, the expansion of NVA firepower has been impressive throughout the country; North Vietnamese forces have a greater concentration of firepower than they had at the outset of the offensive in March 1972. There have been significant increases in AAA, armor, and artillery. North Vietnamese SAMs are deployed in northern South Vietnam. In addition, the communists have rebuilt, or can repair, a number of captured airfields.

13. Perhaps the most ominous aspect of the communist buildup is the positioning of huge stockpiles in or near South Vietnam. From a strictly materiel standpoint, stockpiles of major categories of equipment in place in the North Vietnamese Panhandle, South Vietnam, and adjacent border areas would allow communist forces to maintain heavy combat activity throughout an entire dry season and

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Figure 2

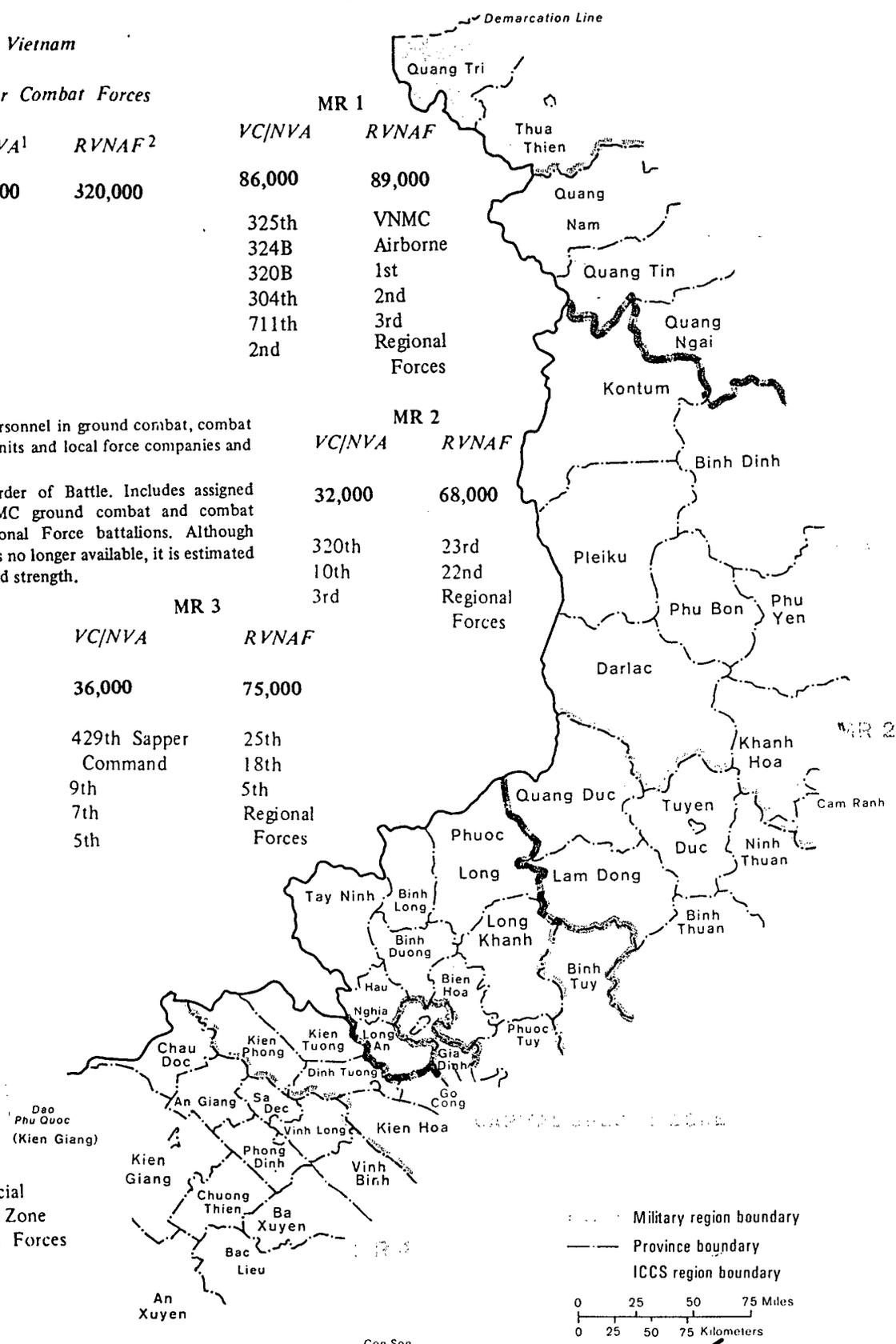
Communist and South Vietnamese Regular Combat Forces in South Vietnam

South Vietnam

Regular Combat Forces

VC/NVA ¹	RVNAF ²	VC/NVA	RVNAF
180,000	320,000	86,000	89,000
		325th 324B 320B 304th 711th 2nd	VNMC Airborne 1st 2nd 3rd Regional Forces
		32,000	68,000
		320th 10th 3rd	23rd 22nd Regional Forces
		36,000	75,000
		429th Sapper Command 9th 7th 5th	25th 18th 5th Regional Forces
26,000	88,000		
1st	21st 9th 7th 44th Special Tactical Zone Regional Forces		

1. Includes VC/NVA personnel in ground combat, combat support, and air defense units and local force companies and platoons.
 2. RVNAF Ground Order of Battle. Includes assigned personnel in ARVN/VNMC ground combat and combat support units, and Regional Force battalions. Although present for duty strength is no longer available, it is estimated to be about 85% of assigned strength.



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