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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
15 March 1965

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Strength of Viet Cong
Military Forces in South Vietnam

Summary

1. Official US estimates of the strength of Viet Cong military forces in South Vietnam are based on a conservative procedure requiring specific identification by at least two "hard" sources before accepting the existence of a Viet Cong unit. As a result, because availability of source data lags behind the appearance of units in the field, actual Viet Cong military strength is likely to be somewhat above the official figures. At times of a rapid build-up of forces, which the Viet Cong seem clearly to have been engaged in for the past year, the real picture may present a substantially greater combat threat than official reporting suggests. This gap between accepted and actual strength could be critical in terms of the balance of local power between Viet Cong and ARVN forces in any given region.

2. While the Viet Cong have far fewer battalions and less manpower than the ARVN, their manner of deployment gives them greater flexibility. Although the ARVN has greater mobility (e.g., air transport), the Viet Cong are able to exploit their freedom from the defense of fixed sites and their ability to infiltrate an area secretly in order to pose successive threats in widely separated areas of the country. Thus they whipsaw the ARVN general reserves, and achieve a kind of strategic superiority in combat areas of their own choosing.

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Relative Strengths and Expansion

3. Government force strength on 15 February totaled 567,000, including 245,000 regulars. MACV's latest Viet Cong Order of Battle holdings, issued on 6 March, show a confirmed strength of 37,000 in regular, identified units. MACV has tentative evidence of as many as 43,000 Viet Cong regulars, and ARVN J-2 holdings--considered realistic by many US observers--put Viet Cong regular strength at between 50,000 and 60,000. In addition, the Viet Cong are variously estimated to have between 80,000 and 120,000 irregular forces.

4. Government force strength has been expanded substantially since late 1961, when US assistance was dramatically increased. Despite a continued high desertion rate, government strength has been rising for about the past nine months, after showing signs of serious attrition in early 1964. Training and performance have also improved.

5. On the other hand, Viet Cong regular force strength has also shown a steady growth during the same period, and has risen by more than a third since a year ago, even by the conservative figures held by MACV. This sharp increase results in part from MACV's confirmation during the year of units already in place in late 1963. There is an average time lag of about 13 months between the first reports of a new unit and its acceptance for OB purposes. Some other units newly accepted in MACV's latest OB holdings were formed largely by infiltrators who entered during the first eight months of 1964.

6. MACV's OB holdings are based on positive unit identification by at least two Viet Cong prisoners or two captured documents. The current OB includes five regimental headquarters, 50 battalions (an increase of eight since a year ago), 145 separate companies, and 35 separate platoons. (ARVN, by comparison, has a total of 214 battalions.) Taking into account the reports of still unconfirmed Viet Cong battalions, actual contact

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in combat, and ARVN's own OB holdings at corps level, there may by now be some 20 Viet Cong battalions in place in addition to the 50 confirmed by MACV. A recent ARVN J-2 study uncovered at least 21,000 Viet Cong who had been recruited within South Vietnam during a four-month period from July through October 1964. A projection from these figures suggests that there may have been more than 60,000 troops recruited within South Vietnam in 1964, more than enough to offset losses and--together with infiltrated elements--to permit the creation of these unconfirmed battalions.

7. There is evidence of five or six Viet Cong regimental headquarters in addition to the five already confirmed. These include possibly two more in the northern provinces and three or four south of Saigon, where no regiments are yet confirmed but where some operations on a regimental level have been conducted.

Viet Cong Capabilities

8. Since about mid-1963, there has been evidence of a fleshing-out of Viet Cong units. The average strength of a Viet Cong regiment in the field is now in the range of 2,000 to 2,500; the comparable strength of an ARVN regiment is 1,000 to 1,500. A Viet Cong battalion now averages 600 to 800, while an ARVN battalion is likely to put about 300 men in the field. Thus, on a unit for unit basis, ARVN is often outmanned.

9. A substantial number of Viet Cong regular battalions, particularly those known or believed assigned to regiments, appear to be equipped with the new 7.62-mm. family of automatic and semiautomatic weapons. Widespread possession of these weapons would give the Viet Cong a firepower superiority over ARVN units, which use primarily equipment of World War II design. Use of new bloc equipment also suggests Viet Cong confidence in an outside supply system, since 7.62-mm. ammunition is not available by capture within South Vietnam. In any event, for nearly two years Viet Cong battalions have appeared to hold adequate firepower in terms of mortars and recoilless rifles; mortar fire against a variety of government targets, including hamlets, is now frequent.

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Effects of Viet Cong Growth

10. The growth in military capabilities of the Viet Cong is reflected in their activities over the past year. The number of Viet Cong - initiated incidents in 1964 was about 60 percent higher than in 1963; emphasis was on terrorist, harassing, and sabotage activity, but the number of battalion-size or larger attacks doubled over 1963. Erosion of government control in the northern provinces, particularly in the populated coastal areas, is giving the Viet Cong increased access to manpower. This Communist encroachment has been accelerating in 1965.

11. Throughout the northern provinces, government forces are now clearly on the defensive, and in several provinces have virtually withdrawn into the district and provincial capitals, thereby largely abandoning the countryside to the Communists. Viet Cong interdiction of both the north-south coastal railroad and the main highway, Route 1, have been increasingly successful in isolating the north. Lateral roads in the north running toward Laos and northern Cambodia have been interdicted or subject to frequent harassment. Pacification efforts in many of the northern provinces have been abandoned in order to concentrate on defenses, and pacification throughout most of the country is stalled. Even the Hop Tac area around Saigon is being affected; one battalion has already been diverted elsewhere and one regiment is still undergoing command changes in the aftermath of the latest coup attempt.

12. Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam are believed capable of mounting up to ten regimental-level attacks almost simultaneously. ARVN forces are capable of meeting most of these attacks with a force of regimental size, either from locally available troops or from the general reserve. Unfortunately, because of the size and firepower of Viet Cong units, the ARVN are often unable to react with sufficient force to ensure defeat of attacking Viet Cong units. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in engagements during the past half year in all four corps areas.

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13. The ARVN general reserve totals 11 marine and airborne battalions, plus a possible five to nine infantry battalions in the corps areas. However, these reserves are almost continually committed in one area or another. Their withdrawal from one commitment and deployment to another can be described as "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

14. Aside from the general reserve, which is itself almost constantly engaged, most ARVN battalions are now committed either to security or pacification operations and thus are not engaged with Viet Cong main force units. Neither the government's Regional Forces nor Popular Forces have the capability to relieve the ARVN for full-time commitment against the Viet Cong regulars. Many of these paramilitary units are used for static defense, and others lack the morale or strength to move in and maintain security in an area that has been cleared or is being held by the ARVN.

15. The Viet Cong, whether engaged in large-scale attacks or smaller scale harassment against government outposts, hamlets, and communications, are exercising the initiative. It is the Viet Cong who normally fix the time and place of engagement. The ARVN for the most part is merely reacting to Viet Cong moves.

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