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Intelligence (2)

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IC 74-2156
21 November 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR: General Wilson

SUBJECT: Message to President/Secretary of State on Likely Increased Levels of Fighting in South Vietnam

1. Apropos of my memo concerning NVA/VC intentions in South Vietnam, attached is the draft of the message on this subject which will be dispatched to the President and Secretary of State at noon today.

2. I think this three and a half page summary hits just about the right note and is a judicious appraisal of the meaning of the COSVN resolution. While by no means saying "the sky is falling" it makes clear the degree of threat which heightened levels of fighting represent to South Vietnam.

3. The DCI has seen this draft and has approved it with very minor word changes.

LS
[Redacted]

Colonel, USMC

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Attachment

IC/PRD/PFCA [Redacted] fn

Distribution:

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COMMUNIST^S PLAN FOR HEAVY MILITARY ACTION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

The Communists are preparing to launch a new round of heavy fighting next month, according to a reliable source. Recently issued COSVN instructions for 1975 outline a Communist dry season campaign running through June, which could amount to the most serious military test for Saigon since the cease-fire. These instructions call for widespread and heavy action, apparently to achieve a maximum shock effect, throughout much of the South Vietnamese countryside during the "first days" of the campaign. Subsequent action is to be concentrated in a relatively few "vulnerable" areas. The instructions emphasize that the campaign must get underway as soon as possible -- between early and late December -- in order to maintain the element of surprise and preempt any possible government dry season attacks.

The COSVN guidelines appear to prescribe a level of fighting during this initial phase below that of the 1972 offensive. They suggest, however, that the Communists may be prepared to commit the forces and firepower already in the south more fully than they did during last summer's fighting in the hopes of achieving some quick and dramatic victories.

Specifically, the instructions call for "intense" fighting in central South Vietnam and the commitment of all Communist units in Military Region 3 to offensive action in the provinces around Saigon. The Communists hope this will force the government to pull one of its divisions out of the Delta and thus enable the Communists to substantially expand their holdings in ~~the Delta~~ ^{that area.}

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The guidelines do not spell out Hanoi's military plans for northern South Vietnam, an area where Hanoi's strategic reserve could be brought to bear with relatively little warning. Although the bad weather conditions that persist in this area during the winter do not favor heavy enemy action, the Communists could mount enough pressure in the north to prevent the redeployment of government forces to more active battlefronts. They may be prepared to strike hard once the weather improves in order to follow up the Communist campaign further south or to exploit any major government reverses that might occur.

The sudden intensification of military pressure called for in the COSVN instructions would probably result in numerous tactical reverses for the government, especially if the Communists make full use of their tanks and artillery. We do not believe, however, that such a campaign, utilizing forces at hand in the South, would decisively change the present strategic balance in South Vietnam.

The Communists probably would be able to make and sustain major gains in only one area -- the central highlands. The North Vietnamese could probably isolate and quickly capture Kontum City and bring heavy pressure on Pleiku City, should they choose to make the effort. Communist forces elsewhere in central South Vietnam could tie down government forces by threatening population centers along the coast. The North Vietnamese could also use their firepower to capture additional territory in the provinces around Saigon, but they do not appear to have the forces necessary to sustain a protracted drive. After some initial losses in this area, government

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resistance would probably stiffen and Saigon would retain control over the bulk of the people and the economically important land. The Communists could further expand their holdings in the Delta, but the government has the edge militarily in this sector and should emerge from the fighting there retaining control of most of the population.

Fighting of the magnitude described in the COSVN guidelines would appear to be within the framework of the strategy Hanoi adopted toward South Vietnam following the cease-fire. Past North Vietnamese Central Committee resolutions and the party's propaganda line indicate that this strategy assumed that the Thieu government could eventually be forced into making significant political concessions to the Communists. It was foreseen that this would stem in part from the ~~decline~~^{decline} in American material support and interest in Vietnam, ^{in part} and from carefully measured Communist military pressure on government forces -- pressure below the level which would risk American military reinvolvement.

The COSVN instruction^s and an analysis of current North Vietnamese propaganda strongly suggest that Hanoi still hopes to use the cease-fire accords to its ultimate advantage rather than return to a total war posture and commit strategic reserve forces to an all-out offensive in the South. The COSVN instructions make it clear that the Communists are still affirming the gradualist approach described above. They present two options open to Hanoi, a "political" track which features ^{some} escalation ^{of} military pressure for a "military" track involving a major offensive. The guidelines clearly come down in favor of the former.

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Lying behind this reaffirmation appears to be a judgment by the leaders in Hanoi that their post-ceasefire strategy is finally beginning to show signs of success. Hanoi's propaganda has been vigorously touting the recent public manifestations of opposition to Thieu in South Vietnam, and, as might be expected, has been egging it on. The North Vietnamese leaders have almost certainly decided that a further, if still measured, increase in military action would serve to encourage popular agitation in the south. North Vietnamese propaganda has indeed begun to talk about the need for "encouragement" of the "urban struggle" through military victories. The COSVN guidelines do not forecast that victory in the south can be achieved in 1975. They do, however, state that "the objective in 1975 is to fundamentally defeat the enemy's rural pacification program and bring about the conditions to help us achieve total victory in 1976."