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CONSEQUENCES OF POSSIBLE US COURSES
OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO VIETNAM

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 13 September 1955. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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CONSEQUENCES OF POSSIBLE US COURSES OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO VIETNAM¹

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the deterrent effect on the Viet Minh of certain US courses of action; to assess the consequences of a US failure to counter overt Viet Minh aggression² and to assess the political repercussions of US armed intervention against Viet Minh aggression.

THE ESTIMATE

I. INTRODUCTORY NOTE

1. We continue to regard as valid the estimate made in NIE 63.1-55, namely that during the period of the estimate (to July 1956) "concern for Western and particularly US reactions, together with general considerations arising from over-all Bloc policy, will prevent the DRV from openly invading the South." We also believe that the present Communist policy of reducing international tension makes unlikely the resort to overt aggression.

II. DETERRENT EFFECTS ON THE VIET MINH OF THE US UNDERTAKING SUFFICIENT MILITARY, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC STEPS TO CLEARLY CONVINCING THE COMMUNISTS THAT OVERT AGGRESSION BY THE VIET MINH AGAINST SOUTH VIETNAM WILL BE MET BY SWIFT AND DETERMINED US ARMED INTERVENTION

2. This assumed US course of action would render even less likely than at present any overt aggression by the Viet Minh against South Vietnam. The Communists would prob-

ably estimate that: (a) Viet Minh forces alone would not be able to capture South Vietnam in the face of swift and determined US armed intervention; (b) Chinese Communist assistance would have to be on such a scale as to seriously risk spreading the war beyond Vietnam; and (c) acquisition of South Vietnam would not be worth such a risk. These considerations would lead the Communists to refrain from overt aggression even if they could see no prospect of winning South Vietnam by other means and believed they enjoyed a marked superiority in forces locally available.

3. The assumed US course of action would not in itself preclude either a Communist decision to initiate large-scale guerrilla action in South Vietnam or the clandestine support of such actions by the Viet Minh.

4. The deterrent effect on the Communists of the assumed course of action would be increased if the US made it clear that nuclear weapons would be used. If the US made it clear that nuclear weapons would not be used the deterrent effect would be reduced. However, the Communists would probably estimate that the US would not maintain such a position if faced with a deteriorating military situation. In the absence of any clear indication, the Communists would almost certainly base their plans on the possibility that nuclear weapons would be used.

¹The possible US courses of action considered herein were furnished the intelligence community for the purposes of this estimate.

²"Aggression" in this paper is defined as a Viet Minh attack by overt armed forces across the armistice line, of such a character that it can clearly be labeled as aggression and is generally regarded as such by free world opinion.

III. CONSEQUENCES OF A US FAILURE TO INTERVENE AGAINST AN OPEN VIET MINH ATTACK AFTER HAVING TAKEN THE PRERATORY STEPS ASSUMED IN II ABOVE

5. The Communists would vigorously exploit the opportunities in Asia created by the failure of the US to intervene in Vietnam. Although Communist China and the Viet Minh would probably not launch early overt aggression against other countries, Chinese Communist diplomacy would probably become openly threatening, possibly supplemented by intimidatory troop movements near the Chinese Communist border with Burma and Laos or within Communist-held Vietnam. Communist policy would also be furthered by greatly increased support from overseas Chinese communities.

6. The Chinese Communists would probably apply strong pressure against those countries whose determination to resist Communist inroads had been most weakened. They would demand an accommodation to the Bloc going beyond the benevolent neutralism that is the current goal of Communist strategy in much of the area. Where more forceful action appeared necessary, Peiping would almost certainly encourage local Communist groups to resume and enlarge guerrilla operations and would support those operations more directly than in the recent past. In some cases units of Chinese Communist troops, possibly of minority origin, might be assigned to reinforce local guerrilla units. Communist operations against the offshore islands might be stepped up, but a full-scale attack against Taiwan would probably not be initiated.

7. The consequences of a US failure to intervene to save South Vietnam would be most serious in Asia. US prestige and influence would be drastically lowered, and the Manila Pact as an effective instrument against Communist aggression would almost certainly be destroyed. Even immediate and forceful subsequent US action elsewhere in Southeast Asia might not persuade any state in the area that further Communist pressure could be resisted. These countries would be reluctant to accept

US offers of assistance from fear that closer alignment with the US would merely invite the Communists to further acts of aggression and that in such an event US assistance would not be forthcoming. They would become increasingly inclined to attempt to maintain their independence through negotiated understandings with Peiping.

8. Both Laos and Cambodia would probably initially proclaim a neutralist position but would shortly enter into cultural and economic agreements with Communist China as the first steps toward political accommodation. Thai apprehensions for their own security would greatly increase. Successive government changes might bring to power a leadership amenable to an accommodation with Communist China. Burma would probably not consider such Communist action as a direct threat and would seek to remain neutral. Should the Thai government reach an accommodation with the Communists, Burma would become concerned and would probably seek a closer alignment with India. The British would be gravely concerned over the security of Malaya and would almost certainly press for the commitment of US forces to the defense of Malaya. Although the Philippines, South Korea, and Nationalist China would remain allied with the US, they would have grave doubts concerning the future. They would almost certainly press the US for a more concrete demonstration of its determination to defend them. In Japan, neutralist sentiment would increase. Indonesia would attempt to maintain a neutral orientation but would be drawn toward an accommodation with the Communist Bloc as Communist influence spread through mainland Southeast Asia.

9. The reactions of the Western European allies of the US would be mixed. On the one hand, they would be concerned about the implications of US withdrawal in the face of an open Communist attack, and there would probably be an increase in defeatist and neutralist sentiment. On the other hand, we believe that these concerns would tend to be offset by their relief that a crisis in the Far East had not led to a renewal of armed con-

flict which might embroil them in general war. In any event, the Europeans would not necessarily conclude that the US would fail to resist Communist aggression in Western Europe. Middle East defense arrangements might become more difficult because of a loss of confidence in US commitments.

IV. CONSEQUENCES OF A FAILURE OF THE US TO INTERVENE AGAINST AN OPEN VIET MINH ATTACK WITHOUT HAVING PREVIOUSLY MADE INTENTIONS CLEARER THAN THEY ARE AT PRESENT

10. The local reactions to the US failure to intervene under these conditions would be virtually the same in Southeast Asia as they would be under the conditions discussed in Section III above. It is widely believed in Southeast Asia that the US is already committed through the Manila Pact to the defense of South Vietnam and that it has strong moral obligations to the Diem government. However, if the US had made its intentions no clearer than at present, the Communists would be less inclined to believe that the US failure to intervene indicated that the US would not resist Communist aggression elsewhere. The Communists might therefore proceed more cautiously in their efforts to exploit the situation created by the fall of South Vietnam. Outside Southeast Asia, the damage to US prestige and the decline in the will to resist Communist pressure would be less than under the conditions discussed in Section III above.

V. CONSEQUENCES OF US ARMED INTERVENTION IF THE US (a) STATED ITS OBJECTIVE WAS LIMITED TO RESTORING THE STATUS-QUO AT THE 17th PARALLEL, OR (b) STATED ITS OBJECTIVE WAS TO DESTROY THE VIET MINH REGIME AND EXTEND NON-COMMUNIST CONTROL TO ALL VIETNAM

11. Asian and European approval of US armed intervention against clearly recognizable Communist aggression would be tempered in varying degrees by the fear that the fighting could not be limited to Vietnam. Our NATO allies and Japan would exert pressure on the US to limit its objective to restoring the status-quo and to keep its military actions clearly consonant with that objective. They would be deeply concerned if the US declared its objective to be the destruction of the Viet Minh regime, or carried the fighting beyond Vietnam. India and other neutrals would exert every effort to bring the fighting to an end.

12. The other nations of mainland Southeast Asia would be encouraged in their efforts to resist Communist pressure by US intervention. They too, however, would fear that the fighting could not be limited to Vietnam and that they would become embroiled in general war in the Far East. Only Nationalist China, the ROK, and possibly Thailand and the Philippines, would give unqualified support to a US declaration that its objective was to destroy the Viet Minh regime and extend non-Communist control to all Vietnam.

13. The Communist reactions to US intervention would probably depend on the course of US military actions rather than on any statements of US objectives.