

Memo

Reactions to a Further US Buildup
in South Vietnam

10 June 1965

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JAN 2005

(b) (3)

REF ID: A65304 b

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Reactions to a Further US Buildup in South Vietnam

1. In this memorandum we consider foreign reactions to an assured US buildup to 150,000 troops in Vietnam as compared with the 50,000 now present and the 70,000 level due to be reached in August. We assume that no comprehensive public announcement of force goals would be made, and that foreign opinion would be reacting to a gradual perception of the US course of action.

2. Our main conclusions are that this strengthening of the US commitment would make some impression on the Communists, and would raise some dangers in our relations with the South Vietnamese, but that the important reactions would come later, when the effectiveness of the total US effort was tested in combat. These considerations are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Reactions in South Vietnam

3. The initial reactions of the South Vietnamese would be somewhat ambivalent: encouragement over the reinforcement,

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accompanied by some tendency to relax and let the US do the fighting. Much would depend upon the way in which US troops were employed. If used to clear and hold large areas, particularly heavily populated areas, the US forces would tend to acquire both the responsibility for the war and the stigma of an army of occupation with colonialist ambitions. This tendency would be less if the US forces were used in a mobile fashion to assist ARVN units, and shared in the most difficult fighting.

4. Ultimately, of course, the key determinant would be the effectiveness of the total US effort, political, economic, and diplomatic, as well as military. If this produced a slackening of VC pressures, US-South Vietnamese working relations would be fairly smooth. If, on the contrary, the war dragged on without respite, war weariness and anti-Americanism would probably begin to threaten the US political base in South Vietnam.

Communist Reactions

5. Viet Cong and DRV. We believe that a US buildup itself, on the scale considered here, would not alter VC/DRV determination to prosecute the struggle. The Communists would recognize that, in military terms, their task had become harder. They would recognize that, in political terms, the US action reaffirmed

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its determination not to accept military defeat. But the arrival of US forces in these numbers would not change the Communists' basic calculation that their staying power is inherently superior to that of Saigon and Washington.

6. The real test, then, would be that of combat. The Viet Cong would respond, as it has to past injections of US forces, by stepping up the insurgency, and the DRV would reinforce it as necessary with men and equipment, including further line units of the PAVN. In this effort, the Communists would probably hold to their present strategy of attrition and subversion, although on a significantly increased scale. They would still seek to defeat the GVN through exhaustion and internal collapse without letting US/GVN forces engage them in decisive battle.

7. We do not know how the test of combat would come out at the level of US involvement now being considered. If, at this or some higher level, the tide of battle runs against the Viet Cong for a substantial period, the Communists would probably consider a large-scale ground offensive by DRV troops. They would recognize, however, that the enlarged US forces had made this more difficult. They would also fear that the US, with a very heavy stake in the war, would not accept defeat in that new

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kind of war without expanding it to the DRV and China. In these circumstances, they would probably prefer to resort to negotiations or simply to let the fighting subside while conserving their own forces. They would be particularly likely to react in this way if they had become convinced that in any enlarged war, the US would use nuclear weapons.

8. China. Peiping would react to the assumed US buildup by urging the VC and the DRV to continue the struggle. It would promise to come to Hanoi's aid if the US involvement reached the point of an invasion of North Vietnam. It might also make some troop movements in South China to underscore this commitment. We believe that as the fighting continued, China would be even less ready than the DRV to conclude that larger US ground forces could turn the tide.

9. The USSR. As the US commitment grew, the Soviet Union would find its problems growing more acute. Moscow would recognize that its own military assistance, and its general shift to a hard, anti-US line, had failed to turn the US from its course. We believe that the Soviets would see no alternative to continued support for the DRV. In time, however, the risks of a prolonged

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and intensified war in Vietnam might press hard on the new collective leadership and face Moscow with the choice of further deepening its commitments and aid or moving toward withdrawal.

Non-Communist Reactions

10. A wide sector of non-Communist world opinion doubts that the US can avoid eventual defeat in Vietnam. In this sector, an increasing injection of US forces would be seen as a prolongation of the agony and an increase in the risks of future escalation. Governments which now support the US course, such as the British, Italians, and Japanese, would come under renewed domestic criticism. Governments which oppose the US, such as France and India, would step up their pressures for negotiations. In general, however, these world reactions would not have as much force as would reactions to more dramatic events, such as a change in the scope of the air war. The ultimate effect upon the US position would continue to be determined by the eventual success or failure of US policy in the Vietnamese war.

Reactions to Use of ROK Forces

11. The South Vietnamese would not be unreservedly receptive to increased ROK contingents in their midst. Greater ROK troop

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commitments probably would not cause serious repercussions in South Korea, though some rattlings would be heard. In the event of major FCK troop losses, it is likely that public sentiment in South Korea -- stimulated by Pyongyang radio and domestic oppositionists -- would begin to question the judgment of President Park, thereby contributing to the endemic political instability in South Korea. North Korea, through propaganda and troop movements and, possibly, contrived incidents in the Korean DMZ area would attempt to heighten any insecurity among South Koreans that developed as a result of troop shifts to Southeast Asia.