

M/H NIE 53/14.3-73

Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam

8 November 1973

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MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS
NATIONAL
INTELLIGENCE
ESTIMATE

Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam

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NIE 53/14.3-73
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THIS ESTIMATE IS SUBMITTED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AND CONCURRED IN BY THE UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and Defense, and the NSA.

Concurring:

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The Director, National Security Agency

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Abstaining:

The Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the subject being outside of his jurisdiction.

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SHORT-TERM PROSPECTS FOR VIETNAM

PRÉCIS

The principal conclusion of NIE 53/14.3-73 was that while a "major" communist offensive in Vietnam was not likely before the end of 1973, it was an extremely close question whether there would be one in the first half of 1974.¹ An examination of the evidence since the Estimate was published four weeks ago has not resulted in consensus within the Intelligence Community on the likelihood of a major offensive in the January-June 1974 period.

We now believe, however, that a sharp expansion of communist and GVN military activity should be expected in the next few weeks—between now and the end of 1973. The overall scale of combat may be somewhat below that of a major offensive as defined herein, but the fighting could be heavy in certain parts of the country, particularly in MR I.

Hanoi's view of US and Soviet preoccupation with the Middle East and of the US domestic situation may encourage the communists to increasing aggressiveness in probing the extent of Saigon's fighting spirit and the extent of Washington's support to the GVN.

¹ As defined in this Estimate, a "major offensive" would encompass a countrywide offensive on the scale of Tet 1968 or March 1972, or attacks on a similar level generally confined to one or two military regions.

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THE ESTIMATE

1. The key conclusion of NIE 53/14.3-73 was that it was a "close" choice whether there would be a major communist offensive in Vietnam before mid-1974. There was general agreement that such an offensive was unlikely before the end of 1973, but there was a wide variety of views on whether one would occur in the first half of 1974. Some elements of the intelligence community believed a major communist offensive would take place in this period and others believed it would not. Since publication of the Estimate on 12 October 1973, various sources inside and outside of South Vietnam have expressed growing concern that such an offensive is in the offing. Moreover, there have been important developments in the Middle East and on the US domestic scene which could affect Hanoi's intentions. In the following paragraphs we examine the validity of the Estimate's key conclusion in the light of what has occurred over the last four weeks both inside Indochina and in the rest of the world.

The Situation in Indochina

2. There has been no persuasive evidence from Indochina that of itself would permit us to predict with more certainty than we did four weeks ago the likelihood of a major

offensive in the first half of 1974.² The situation has changed, however, with respect to the near-term future—between now and the end of 1973. It is now clear that for the next 60 days or so both the communists and Saigon will at a minimum undertake increased local actions of the sort exemplified by the communists' rocketing of Bien Hoa and attacks in Quang Duc and Pleiku Provinces, and the GVN's air and ground attacks in Tay Ninh Province. While the overall scale of fighting may not reach the level of a major offensive,³ combat on quite a large scale will almost certainly occur in certain areas within the next few weeks.

The Effect of Developments Elsewhere in the World

3. *The Middle East Crisis:* The lessons for Hanoi from the Middle East situation are conflicting:

— On the one hand, Hanoi saw that not only was the US willing to mount a sub-

² At Annex is a summary of the most recent evidence from Indochina—pro and con—bearing on the likelihood of such an offensive.

³ As defined in this Estimate, a "major offensive" would encompass a countrywide offensive on the scale of Tet 1968 or March 1972, or attacks on a similar level generally confined to one or two military regions.

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stantial resupply effort for its Israeli ally, but that the US took a tough line with the Soviets as well.

- On the other hand, the North Vietnamese probably found sustenance in Moscow's willingness to resupply its Arab clients, and they might now believe that the Soviets would provide whatever supplies they needed.

At this stage, Hanoi would be cautious about drawing close parallels between the Vietnam and Middle Eastern situations, and probably has not reached any hard and fast conclusions about the effect of the Middle East crisis on Vietnam. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese leaders might believe that both Washington and Moscow were so preoccupied with the Middle East that Hanoi could risk a more adventuresome military policy with relative impunity. Furthermore, should the Soviets reverse their present course and adopt a very bellicose attitude toward the US over the Arab-Israeli question, deliberately sacrificing détente in the process, Hanoi might be inclined to pursue a more aggressive course of its own.

4. *US-Chinese Contacts:* The Chinese, like the Soviets, are currently viewed with some nervousness in Hanoi, and never more than when a visit to Peking by Dr. Kissinger is in the offing. Hanoi has a residual fear that a new US-Chinese agreement may emerge which limits its options in Vietnam. The experience of the past year or so, however, has given the North Vietnamese considerable insight into the amount and type of restraint Peking will try to impose on them. While they might anticipate a reluctance by Peking to support increased military action in the next few weeks, they probably believe that Peking would not repudiate such a military initiative or block it in any effective way.

5. *Events in the US:* It seems likely that the North Vietnamese are having trouble evaluat-

ing the current domestic situation in the US. The Politburo members cannot regard recent events as providing evidence that the US has lost the power to act decisively. They also can have no great confidence in their ability to predict the reactions of the US to new situations. At the same time, Hanoi's leaders doubtless wonder about the extent to which the US Government can now meet a communist challenge in Vietnam. They are doubtless also hoping their two big communist patrons will try to take advantage of the disarray in Washington in ways that favor Hanoi's cause, and they may be tempted to probe for some advantage on their own. The Politburo will certainly keep a sharp eye on further developments in US domestic politics. Hanoi's perception of US strengths will obviously be affected by its reading of the next few weeks' and months' events.

Conclusion

6. An examination of the evidence over the past four weeks has not resulted in consensus within the Intelligence Community on the likelihood of a major North Vietnamese offensive in the first half of 1974. To those elements of the Community which believed the Vietnamese communists were already planning major military action, both the preoccupation of the great powers with the Middle East and Washington's domestic problems give further impetus to these plans. To other elements of the community which did not believe a major offensive was in the works when NIE 53/14.3-73 was published, developments in the Middle East and in the US are regarded as insufficient by themselves to cause Hanoi to launch such an offensive in the first half of next year.

7. We would reiterate, however, that a sharp expansion of communist military ac-

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tivity is to be expected between now and the end of 1973. How "sharp" is something that may well now be under active debate in Hanoi. The Vietnamese Communist Party's intention to gain control over the south, by military force if necessary, remains unchanged. The North Vietnamese already have in place

a considerable capability for offensive action in South Vietnam, particularly in MR 1. The Hanoi Politburo may find it impossible to resist the temptations of opportunistic adventurism while the US is in a period of domestic stress and has its international attention focused on oil and the Middle East.

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ANNEX

CURRENT EVIDENCE PRO AND CON ON A
COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE THIS DRY SEASON

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CURRENT EVIDENCE PRO AND CON ON A COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE THIS DRY SEASON

A. Evidence arguing for an offensive this dry season includes:

- A continuing buildup of logistics facilities and stockpiles of materiel just north and south of the DMZ, including the establishment of large truck parks, in preparation for a dry season logistics push;
- The continuing flow of personnel to posts along the infiltration corridor—a flow that could support the dispatch of substantial numbers of combat troops to South Vietnam;
- A tougher communist propaganda line, highlighted by unusual public orders from various southern communist commands that tell the troops to heighten their vigilance and “fight back” against their opponents;
- Numerous rallier and agent reports, most of them low-level, referring to plans for main force offensive action in late 1973 or early 1974;
- Further evidence of very large heavy weapons inventories in North Vietnam, part of which has probably been brought into the country since 27 January.

B. Evidence arguing against an offensive this dry season includes:

- The continuing absence of any firm indication of substantial combat troop infiltration this fall to most of central and southern South Vietnam;
- Indications [redacted] that at least some recruits inducted this fall do not expect to be in South Vietnam until the 1974-1975 dry season;
- The absence of any reliable evidence that Hanoi is preparing the North Vietnamese people for the sacrifices they would have to anticipate if an offensive was launched;
- A report [redacted] that COSVN has issued instructions heavily emphasizing that a general offensive is not in the works in 1973, and implying that rice shortages may limit communist military options in the first part of next year.
- Despite the impressive quantities of men and materiel that have been sent South in the last year, Hanoi still faces some manpower gaps in certain areas.

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