

**NIE 53-63**

**Prospects in South Vietnam**

**17 April 1963**

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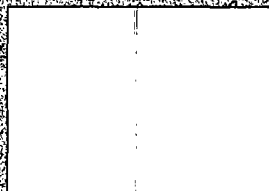
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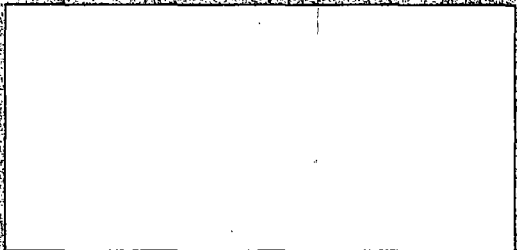
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# Prospects in South Vietnam

*Submitted by the*  
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

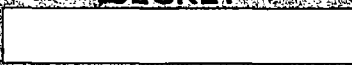
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## PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

### THE PROBLEM

To assess the situation and prospects in South Vietnam, with special emphasis upon the military and political factors most likely to affect the counterinsurgency effort.

### CONCLUSIONS

A. We believe that Communist progress has been blunted and that the situation is improving. Strengthened South Vietnamese capabilities and effectiveness, and particularly US involvement, are causing the Viet Cong increased difficulty, although there are as yet no persuasive indications that the Communists have been grievously hurt. (*Paras. 27-28*)

B. We believe the Communists will continue to wage a war of attrition, hoping for some break in the situation which will lead to victory. They evidently hope that a combination of military pressure and political deterioration will in time create favorable circumstances either for delivering a *coup de grâce* or for a political settlement which will enable them to continue the struggle on more favorable terms. We believe it unlikely, especially in view of the open US commitment, that the North Vietnamese regime will either resort to overt military attack or introduce acknowledged North Vietnamese military units into the south in an effort to win a quick victory. (*Paras. 29-31*)

C. Assuming no great increase in external support to the Viet Cong, changes and improvements which have occurred during the past year now indicate that the Viet Cong can be contained militarily and that further progress can be made in expanding the area of government control and in creating greater security in the countryside. However, we do not believe that it is pos-

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sible at this time to project the future course of the war with any confidence. Decisive campaigns have yet to be fought and no quick and easy end to the war is in sight. Despite South Vietnamese progress, the situation remains fragile. (*Para. 32*)

D. Developments during the last year or two also show some promise of resolving the political weaknesses, particularly that of insecurity in the countryside, upon which the insurgency has fed. However, the government's capacity to embark upon the broader measures required to translate military success into lasting political stability is questionable. (*Paras. 33-35*)

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## DISCUSSION

### I. NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

1. The Communists have been struggling to win control of Indo-China ever since the Indo-Chinese Communist Party was organized in the 1920's. This struggle has passed through several stages, including operations against the Japanese in the later years of World War II and a major war against the French from 1946-1954. After the French withdrawal, the Communists were apparently confident that the South Vietnamese Government (GVN) would collapse, or that in any event, the nationwide elections called for in the Geneva Accords would soon deliver all of Vietnam into their hands. Although guerrilla bands were left behind when the country was partitioned, the Communists did not engage in armed operations against the GVN, but attempted to undermine it by other means. Contrary to Communist expectations, however, the GVN, under President Ngo Dinh Diem, not only survived but developed sufficient strength, partly as a consequence of Western political and economic support, to enable it to ignore the 1956 election deadline and to make appreciable progress.

2. These developments confronted the Vietnamese Communists with a new situation. They had developed substantial ground forces in North Vietnam, but South Vietnam also, with US assistance, had substantially improved its military capabilities. Open invasion, therefore, could not be a walk-in, and in any case the strong US commitment, not only to South Vietnam but to southeast Asia as a whole, made such a course an undesirable one. The Vietnamese Communists thereupon resumed guerrilla warfare combined with intensified terrorism, subversion, and enticement. They evidently concluded that, by winning converts and sympathizers in the countryside, by depriving the government of effective control, and by causing loss of morale and will within the government cadres, they would pave the way for a final political victory. This campaign was sharply stepped up in late 1959.

3. South Vietnam was and remains highly vulnerable to rural terrorism and guerrilla warfare. Its people have no tradition of loyalty to a government in Saigon. The Vietnamese peasant has always accommodated himself to whatever force was best able to protect or to punish him—or offer him a vision, however illusory, of a better life. The "government" meant the local officials with whom he was in contact, many of whom tended to be ineffective and often venal. Various forms of minor corruption and petty bureaucratic tyranny have long been rife in the provinces, and the offenders were seldom disciplined by their superiors. Most peasants are primarily interested in peace and do not care who wins the military victories. Security is significant to the peasant largely in terms of how it affects him personally.

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4. From 1954 to about 1957, major steps were taken by the Diem regime to create a viable South Vietnamese state. The government completed the resettlement of about one million refugees from North Vietnam, developed promising Civic Action and public information programs in the countryside, extended governmental authority throughout most of the country, substantially improved internal security, established governmental institutions more responsible and representative than had existed before, and brought into the bureaucracy an appreciable number of young and capable civil and military personnel. However, after 1957 Diem failed to expand this social, political, and economic base. Perhaps most important of all, the government failed to develop a capability to protect the peasant and the villager. Partly on US advice, the Vietnamese Army had been organized, trained, and deployed primarily as a defense against open attack from the north. It proved ill-qualified to protect the population against guerrilla attack and terrorism.

5. With Diem's consolidation of his personal control over the bureaucracy and the military establishment, he became increasingly reluctant to delegate authority or take other measures to improve the efficiency and morale of the military and civil services. Close operational control from Saigon not only generated serious discontent within all levels of the government but also inhibited the effectiveness of government actions, particularly in the countryside. The launching of a full-scale Communist insurgency in late 1959, finally led the Diem regime, partly out of necessity and partly as a result of the substantially increased US commitment to South Vietnam, to initiate broad measures to rectify these conditions.

6. The Communist effort in South Vietnam is essentially one of political subversion in which extensive military activity presently plays the predominant role. The primary aim of the Communists is to secure the support of the rural population—support buttressed, where possible, by positive loyalty. By various forms of military and terrorist action, they endeavor to cow the recalcitrant, demonstrate that the government cannot protect its adherents, and create a general atmosphere of insecurity. They also endeavor to weaken the government's position in the countryside by assassinating its officials, defeating its forces, sapping the morale of its cadres and supporters and, generally, tarnishing its image in every way possible. They make extensive use of guerrilla base areas and safe havens which they seek to protect, although they seldom attempt to hold ground against appreciably superior government forces. In addition, the Communists are continually developing the capabilities of their "regular" units, with the apparent hope of ultimately becoming able to engage government troops in at least quasi-conventional combat.

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7. To counter the impact of increased US assistance, the Communists are gearing for a long struggle and have reorganized their military and political apparatus accordingly. They claim to be fighting in the cause of the "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam," organized late in 1960. This organization currently has little following in Vietnam, is clearly a front for the Communists, and its ostensible leaders are political nonentities. It is designed to provide the framework of a governmental apparatus, if and when more significant gains are made in the current struggle, and to serve meanwhile as a vehicle for seeking international neutralist support.

## II. COMMUNIST CAPABILITIES

8. Hanoi directs the Communist campaign against the GVN, although it permits the Viet Cong commanders considerable tactical discretion. The Sino-Soviet quarrel apparently has not affected the Communist war effort. North Vietnam is being courted by both sides, but there is no evidence that either Moscow or Peiping has offered to underwrite a substantial intensification of the Viet Cong effort or that Hanoi has sought greatly increased aid from either. In pursuing their interests in southeast Asia and maintaining their independence, the North Vietnamese probably feel that they need the support of both Moscow and Peiping, and will probably continue therefore to attempt to avoid commitment to either side.

9. *Military Strength.* We estimate that there are now about 22,000-25,000 full-time Viet Cong military personnel organized into identifiable units of up to battalion size. A substantial portion of these forces is well trained, well disciplined, and well led. Their armament consists of light infantry weapons, machine guns, bazookas, mortars, and a few 57-mm recoilless rifles. Viet Cong forces are not known to have artillery or antiaircraft artillery weapons, though in recent months they have become quite adept at using small arms and machine guns against South Vietnamese and US aircraft.

10. Viet Cong regular units are supplemented by a large pool of lightly armed, semitrained local guerrillas and militia who probably number about 100,000. The guerrillas and militia sometimes are used with regular units as a first or shock wave of an attack in their locality. At other times, operating under local district committee supervision, they are employed for terrorism, armed propaganda, and small ambushes. The militia are charged with protecting Viet Cong areas when other units are absent. Both militia and guerrillas constitute a training and replacement pool for the regular forces. The bulk of the Viet Cong regular troops consists of locally recruited or impressed South Vietnamese peasants promoted as needed to regular units on the basis of their previous experience and performance in militia and local guerrilla groups.

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11. *Logistics.* For weapons, ammunition, and related supplies, the Viet Cong forces rely primarily upon capture from government forces. Some stocks were left behind when the Communists withdrew northward in 1954, some arms are brought in by infiltrators, and some are fabricated by the Viet Cong themselves. They also rely upon indigenous sources for food, shelter, and other nonmilitary supplies. Supplies are frequently purchased, although they are seized if necessary. In areas where the Viet Cong have established firm control, they operate as a government, levying taxes and providing some services. Since most of the cadres sent from North Vietnam are of southern origin and are normally returned to their own provinces, they are able to draw local support for the Viet Cong effort.

12. The limited evidence available indicates that some equipment, such as recoilless rifles, mortar fuses, and medical supplies, together with selected cadres, have for some time been infiltrated from the north. As the scale of Viet Cong operations has increased over the last two years, the amount of materiel and numbers of personnel brought in from North Vietnam have probably also increased. While the basic guerrilla effort could continue without outside support, this support probably has been essential to the higher levels of effort which have been achieved in the last year or so.

13. Men and materiel are evidently being infiltrated through Laos, and to a lesser extent through Cambodia and by sea. The Laotian corridor, which is controlled by Communist forces, is an important military asset. Due to the nature of the terrain, however, the Vietnamese infiltrators could almost certainly continue to make some use of the area even if it were not under Communist control. Use of the corridor would probably significantly increase if the Viet Cong decided to substantially step up the level of military activity.

14. *Tactics and Effectiveness.* The Viet Cong have proved themselves a formidable enemy and an effective guerrilla force. Despite some setbacks, they have generally proved adept at the classic tactics of surprise, constant movement, concentration for attack, withdrawal and dispersal. They have also demonstrated flexibility in modifying their tactics to counter new South Vietnamese operational concepts. They have shown themselves capable of company, and even battalion, size attacks and of carrying out strikes against widely dispersed targets at about the same time. One important factor in their success is their effective intelligence system. Informants and sympathizers exist throughout the countryside, and the Viet Cong evidently have been able to maintain intelligence coverage of virtually every level in the South Vietnamese military and civil establishment. This has enabled them to avoid some government counteractions and effectively to combat others.

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15. *Nonmilitary Capabilities.* The Viet Cong possess two important capabilities which they have not yet fully exercised—terrorism in the cities and harassment of economic life. Although the Viet Cong almost certainly have many adherents in urban areas, their terrorist activities have been few and generally unsuccessful. Commercial road and water transport continues to function, and rubber—the principal earner of foreign exchange—continues to be produced and moved to market. One reason the Viet Cong have not attempted to interdict these activities is that they receive considerable revenue from “taxation” of rubber plantations and transport facilities. Another and perhaps more important reason is that the Viet Cong probably have felt that full exercise of these capabilities would hinder rather than help them attain their objective of winning popular support.

### III. THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE RESPONSE

16. *General Approach and Strategy.* The initial South Vietnamese response to the intensified guerrilla activity in the countryside reflected neither a sense of urgency nor an understanding of the nature of the challenge. There was a tendency to regard the strengthened insurgency simply as a threat created and sustained from the outside; there was a general failure to appreciate the internal support which the insurgency generated or the grievances and basic conditions upon which it fed. It was regarded as essentially a military problem to be dealt with by military means. These views have become modified as a consequence of the progress of events and as a consequence of US effort to convince the regime to regard the conflict in broader perspective. During the past year and a half, the government has begun to see the conflict as an internal one requiring socio-political as well as military measures and to view the military problem as one requiring greater flexibility in deployment and tactics. Government recognition of these factors has resulted in the development, with US assistance, of a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy.

17. *Military Capabilities and Weaknesses.* The South Vietnamese regular military establishment consists of about 215,000 men, of whom almost 200,000 are army. The paramilitary services, consisting of the Civil Guard of about 75,000 men and a Self Defense Corps of about 100,000 men, are responsible for internal security as well as counter-guerrilla operations. Supplementing these are another 40,000 men in Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups, which embrace a wide variety of units, some of which serve part-time.

18. During the past year, force levels have been substantially increased. The various military and paramilitary forces have been re-trained and re-equipped and their tactical mobility improved, principally through US helicopter and transport aircraft. As a result of this improvement in tactical mobility, the South Vietnamese forces

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are now able to strike more quickly and in greater strength than ever before. The establishment of Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups is creating a paramilitary capability in certain areas not now reached by regular forces. This program has also introduced the government's presence into many hitherto remote areas and enlisted the active support of minority groups. Appreciable progress has also been made in securing the support of ethnic minorities (Montagnards) in the Central Highlands, long courted by the Viet Cong, though traditional sentiments of reciprocal suspicion and disdain between the Vietnamese and the Montagnards still hamper this effort.

19. In recent months, offensive operations have been stepped up significantly, the Viet Cong have been engaged in small-unit actions and caught in ambushes, and efforts have been made to destroy Viet Cong forces rather than to drive them away and allow them to disperse. Night operations and patrolling are increasing. Recent reorganization of the army command structure, together with retraining of army personnel, is bringing about greater participation by the regular establishment in the counterinsurgency effort and more effective coordination with the paramilitary services. Some 5,000-6,000 US-trained Montagnards are now conducting armed patrols designed to provide intelligence and, to some extent, to interdict Viet Cong access routes from Laos.

20. Nevertheless, a number of factors still prevent the South Vietnamese military and security forces from realizing their full potential. The army still makes extensive use of conventional tactics against guerrilla forces. The Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps have borne a major share of the fighting and have suffered heavy casualties. Although the quality of intelligence is improving, there is still a lack of reliable and timely combat intelligence at the provincial and district level and of political intelligence on the Communist apparatus. Also, available combat intelligence is often not exploited operationally. These shortcomings, together with Viet Cong intelligence coverage—including penetration—of the South Vietnamese establishment, reduce the effectiveness of counteraction.

21. A shortage of experienced and aggressive leaders, especially at the company grade and noncommissioned officer level, is one of the GVN's most serious weaknesses. This in part reflects the problem of adapting a conventional force to the requirements of counterinsurgency and simultaneously expanding the size of this force. In part it also reflects political factors. For example, promotions tend to be based upon presumed loyalty to Diem rather than upon professional competence. Senior commanders frequently feel hampered by the fact that some of their subordinates are directly controlled by or have direct access to the Presidency. US support and presence and some increased disposition on the part of the Presidency to allow professional officers greater freedom have tended to improve officer morale and to increase

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military initiative in the field. Some officers, however, still question Diem's ability to lead the country to victory, and reports of military coup plotting persist. Morale among the enlisted ranks is harder to determine and varies from unit to unit, but desertions and AWOLs still constitute a serious drain on manpower.

22. The political impact of government military operations has sometimes been diminished by mistakes and offenses committed by government forces. Although such incidents are difficult to prevent, South Vietnamese leaders generally recognize this problem and are trying to correct it.

23. *Politico-Military Programs and Their Effectiveness.* In concert with its military endeavors, the GVN is engaged in a number of social, economic, and political programs. Especially important are two inter-related politico-military programs: clear-and-hold operations and the strategic hamlets. Both of these programs are designed to provide the peasantry with protection from Viet Cong depredations and, concomitantly, to deny the Viet Cong continued access to the peasantry. Clear-and-hold operations are integrated pacification projects in which priority areas are cleared by military force; political control is then consolidated by building strategic hamlets and sending in Civic Action teams to set up governmental services and help the villagers help themselves. The strategic hamlet program involves grouping the peasant population in fortified, defensible settlements and undertaking various measures within these settlements to weed out Viet Cong sympathizers, improve the villager's lot, enhance the government's image, and give the peasant grounds for identifying himself with the government's fight against the Viet Cong. The Citizens' Irregular Defense effort is a related program also designed to separate the populace from the Viet Cong. Its armed groups, for example, are designed to penetrate insecure areas and establish enclaves of security; these, in turn, are to be expanded and eventually linked with areas where strategic hamlets are already established.

24. The strategic hamlet program is an undertaking of major importance. It has enlarged the area under effective government control, and there are many indications that the Communists consider it a threat of considerable magnitude. If effectively implemented it can strike at the roots of Viet Cong strength. Most South Vietnamese leaders regard the program as a key element in the counterinsurgency effort. Some of them—principally Ngo Dinh Nhu—also regard the program as a major step in the social reconstruction of rural Vietnam and as a means of consolidating their political control over it.

25. The government claims to have completed more than 5,000 strategic hamlets and to have about 2,000 others under construction. The "completed" hamlets vary widely in the quality of their physical defenses

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and the effectiveness of their political programs. The most successful have been ones set up in areas where integrated and systematic pacification has been undertaken; however, in many instances, hamlets have been set up without the necessary basis for their continuing defense having been established. Administrative deficiencies have also hampered the execution of the program: excessive exactions have frequently been levied on local resources, peasants have often not been compensated for materials or labor furnished, and officials have tended to show more interest in controlling the hamlet population than in improving its living conditions.

26. Results of clear-and-hold operations conducted in a few provinces last year were encouraging, and plans for similar operations have been drawn up for all provinces. However, there is evidence that the government is becoming impatient with the time and effort such integrated operations demand. Diem is apparently coming to feel that his armed forces have improved to the point where they may now be able to mount quick, "leap-frog" military strikes against the Viet Cong throughout the country without worrying about the political consolidation of such military gains.

#### IV. PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS

27. *Current Military Situation.* Although there is no satisfactory objective means of determining how the war is going, we believe that—all factors considered—Communist progress has been blunted and the situation is improving. Strengthened South Vietnamese capabilities and effectiveness, and particularly US involvement, are causing the Viet Cong increased difficulty. There are some indications that the Viet Cong are suffering from local shortages of supplies and a decline in morale. There have been few desertions by Viet Cong regular personnel, but there has been some increase in desertions from the Viet Cong militia and guerrilla forces. Although statistics of casualties and figures on the numbers of villages under government control are not very reliable or very helpful indicators, a greater degree of security in the countryside has apparently been achieved and the government's control of important population areas has expanded somewhat during the past several months.

28. There are as yet no persuasive indications, however, that the Viet Cong have been grievously hurt. They continue to operate in most sections of South Vietnam, and much of the countryside remains in their hands. Although the number of Viet Cong incidents and attacks is below 1962 levels, this number has increased in the past few weeks. Government military capabilities have increased markedly during the past year, but so have those of the Viet Cong.

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29. *Communist Intentions.* The magnitude of the US commitment and the increasing effectiveness of the South Vietnamese counterinsurgency effort are almost certainly causing Hanoi and its Viet Cong subordinates increasing concern. Although we believe that the Communists have in no way relaxed their determination to win control of South Vietnam, they must realize that their task is becoming increasingly difficult, and they may be reappraising their general policy. We believe it unlikely, especially in view of the open US commitment, that the North Vietnamese regime will either resort to overt military attack or introduce acknowledged North Vietnamese military units into the south in an effort to win a quick victory.

30. For the present, at least, we believe that the Communists will continue to wage a war of attrition, hoping for some break in the situation which will lead to victory. They must be aware, for example, of the disaffection engendered by the political methods of the regime, and they are probably also aware of the dissatisfaction among many Americans over the policies and practices of the GVN. They probably hope for political deterioration which will make their task easier, or that the US will tire of costly and frustrating guerrilla warfare and accept some facesaving way out. At some point the Communists might launch a serious effort to convene an international conference to consider the neutralization of South Vietnam.

31. Any non-Communist coup effort would probably be regarded as providing an opportunity for exploitation. We believe that at present the Communists have neither the capability themselves to lead a successful *coup d'état* nor the ties with the non-Communist opposition which would enable them to participate in a coup led by non-Communists. Nevertheless, they might be able in an unstable situation resulting from either a successful or unsuccessful coup to gain some politically strategic position. In any event, the Communists evidently hope that a combination of military pressure and political deterioration will in time create favorable circumstances either for delivering a *coup de grâce* or for a political settlement, say on the model of Laos, which would enable them to continue the struggle on more favorable terms.

32. *The Outlook.* Whether the Communists are correct in their appraisal will, of course, depend in some measure upon the extent and nature of US involvement, but primarily upon the South Vietnamese response to the developing situation. We do not believe that it is possible at this time to project the future course of the war with any confidence. Despite GVN progress, the situation remains fragile. A series of major Viet Cong successes, should they occur, might have a shattering psychological effect. Nevertheless, the heavy US involvement and close working relationships between US and Vietnamese personnel have fundamentally altered the outlook. Changes and improvements have occurred during the past year which for the first time

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indicate that the Viet Cong can be contained militarily and that further progress can be made in expanding the area of government control and in creating greater security in the countryside. However, some areas of Viet Cong control, such as the Mekong delta, will be very difficult to pacify, decisive campaigns have yet to be fought, and no quick and easy end to the war is in sight.

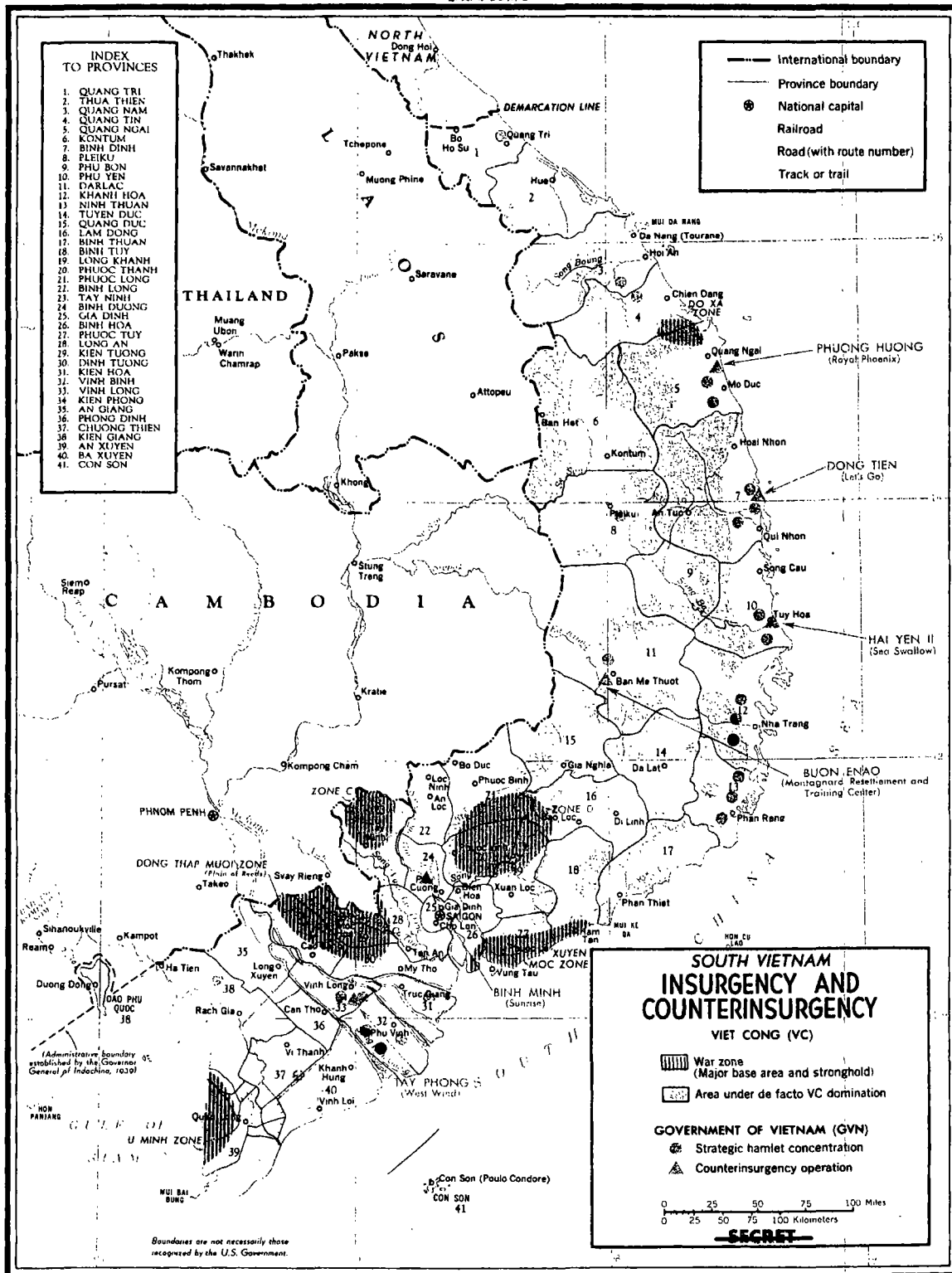
33. Developments in the last year or two have also gone some distance in establishing a basis for winning over the peasantry and in improving the efficiency of the military establishment and the civilian bureaucracy. It can, of course, be argued that only a highly centralized regime, single-mindedly dedicated to independence, and placing a heavy emphasis on personal loyalty can cope with the problems of guerrilla warfare. However, we believe that a greater willingness on the part of the regime to enlist the active support of those who have become disaffected or discouraged in the face of Diem's techniques of government would considerably speed the reduction of the Viet Cong insurgency.

34. Substantial reduction of Viet Cong military power, however, would probably intensify rather than reduce the need for changes in the philosophy and practice of the Diem regime, if revived insurgency were to be precluded and military victory translated into political consolidation. The achievement of physical security in the countryside would in itself satisfy a major political requirement in convincing the peasants of the government's ability to protect them. But the government must be both willing and able to expand its efforts to bring social, political, and economic improvements to the countryside if the peasant is to recognize a stake in the survival of the government and to be fortified against Communist blandishments. Effective action in this and other fields, particularly with the removal of a substantial US presence at all levels of the government, would almost certainly require a wider participation in the development and implementation of policy and a considerable reduction in the tight, personal control of the bureaucracy.

35. On the basis of its past performance, the ability of the Diem regime to move willingly and effectively in these directions is questionable, and may become even more so should military victory come within sight. With the removal of the inhibiting effects of an immediate and overwhelming military danger, political stability would be greatly threatened if disappointment with the regime's performance mounted among important sectors of the population and the conviction deepened that legal avenues to change remained blocked.

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