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C A B I N E T M I N U T E

Foreign Affairs & Defence Committee

Canberra, 7th April, 1965

Decision No. 859(FAD)

Submission No. 719 - Further Military Assistance to South Vietnam.

The Committee considered a report on the Vietnam situation by the Defence Committee covering recent military staff talks in Honolulu and subsequent discussions between the United States Secretary of State and the Australian Ambassador in Washington.

2. The Committee:-

- (a) was informed by the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, who participated in the Honolulu talks, of the present military situation in Vietnam, of action to be taken by the United States in the immediate future to supplement their forces in South Vietnam and of further military proposals under consideration in Washington to give greater strength to their defence posture in the area at a later stage, if appropriate;
- (b) noted the discussions between the United States Secretary of State and the Australian Ambassador as contained in Cable No. 1152 of 2nd April;
- (c) noted that it was likely that the United States would shortly request Australia to contribute a battalion for duty in South Vietnam.

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2.

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3. The Committee discussed in particular the question of providing a battalion to South Vietnam. It was realized that the United States had stopped short of making a formal request for a battalion, but at the same time the Committee felt that the approaches which the United States had made, both through Admiral Sharp at Honolulu and through the Secretary of State, should be interpreted as leaving no doubt that the United States desired and hoped for Australia's assistance in this way.
4. In discussion, the Committee -
 - (a) considered whether there should be further exploration with the United States as to whether the commitment of a battalion to Vietnam would be the most useful Australian action, taking into account our limited defence forces and the overall defence position and potentialities in South-East Asia;
 - (b) noted that the planned expansion of the Army is now getting nearer to the point where provision can be made for other commitments after allowing for the allotment of a battalion to Vietnam;
 - (c) noted the need for the question of Australian contribution of forces, and the theatre to which it would be made, to be related to the diplomatic and political position as well as military need;
 - (d) agreed that diplomatic and political position should be kept under continuous review at the top political level by all our allies and that Australia should continue to use every opportunity of participating in such discussions;
 - (e) emphasized Australia's stake in the preservation of United States interests in South Vietnam and South-East Asia.

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3.

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5. Assessing the issues, the Committee agreed that the necessary course is to accede to what amounts to a request from the Government of the United States. To provide a battalion would have military value in itself, but in addition would be of great importance in present and future Australian/United States defence relationships.
6. It was decided therefore that the United States should be informed that Australia would be willing to assist the American build up of forces in South Vietnam by the provision of one battalion if and when formally requested. The presumption was that the battalion would be deployed at Danang, but it was considered essential that before committing it, Ministers be clear about and approve its military role and the timing of its deployment.
7. The Committee agreed that, in informing the United States of Australia's attitude to the request, they should be told that it was to be understood that this decision, which would disperse our forces still further, would place new limitations on our military capacity in other parts of South-East Asia, including New Guinea and that Australia must look for support from both the United States and British Governments in dealing with any special difficulties which might arise elsewhere in the area, particularly during the period of Army reorganization which was directed towards the establishment of more battalions.
8. In conveying this decision to the United States it should be made abundantly clear that this reference to our special problems was in no way to be construed as a desire to avoid contributing. It was rather that the implications arising from further participation in South Vietnam with our limited forces at this point of time should be fully appreciated and supported.
9. The Committee decided that the British Government should be informed also of this decision along similar lines as for the United States.
10. On the question of the provision of a further 150 instructors for South Vietnam, the Committee decided that Australia would not be able

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to meet this request. The requirement for instructors and N.C.O's by the Australian Army to carry through its own reorganization and build up and train National Servicemen made it quite impossible to go beyond the 100 instructors already committed to South Vietnam.

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Committee Secretary.

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