

332. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State¹

Saigon, June 5, 1965.

4074. The following is an estimate of the political-military situation in South Vietnam as of 5 June 1965, drafted by the mission Intelligence Committee and concurred in by Ambassador Taylor, Ambassador Johnson and General Westmoreland. Suggest it be passed eyes only to Secretary McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Admiral Raborn and Admiral Sharp.

Political Situation

Broadly speaking, the current unsettled political situation is a reflection of the traditional divisive force at work in SVN (particularly the religious and regional cleavages), the inexperience of the Vietnamese with practical political processes, the frustrations of two decades of war without victory in sight, and the predominant weight of the Saigon "intellectuals" in the political equation. The Quat government did not create these difficulties but rather is a victim of them. Quat and his associates have failed as have past regimes to neutralize or balance the opposing forces before they reached such proportions as to constitute a strong challenge to his government. In the current confrontation Quat's opposition is composed primarily of the Sudistes, militant Catholic elements, and out-politicians seeking to improve their lot in any change of government. Fundamentally, the Sudistes and the militant Catholic elements have been opposed to Quat from the date of his investiture but have lacked the issues with which to mount a real confrontation. In seeking to render his government more acceptable to the opposition elements, Quat presented them with an opportunity to organize and orchestrate a campaign to bring him down. In this, they had enlisted the support of a pliable Chief of State and of elements of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects motivated primarily by regional and political sentiments.

The role of Chief of State Suu has been crucial and [in] the present confrontation he has provided both the issue (in the interpretation of the provisional charter) and the means to focus the political opposition. Suu's actions may well be motivated by long-term political ambitions as well as the short-term political considerations. He is strongly influenced by the Sudiste groups (Le Van Thu, Hoang Ho, Tran Van Van, etc.)

¹ Source: Department of State, Central Files, POL 27 VIET S. Top Secret: Immediate; Nodis. No time of transmission is indicated on the source text, but it was received in the Department of State at 9:06 a.m. A copy of the telegram was passed to the White House, and McGeorge Bundy sent it to the President on June 5 with a covering note emphasizing the final two pages dealing with the military balance, which Bundy noted were "interesting, and also troubling." (Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, Nodis, Vol. II (A))

responsible for his election as Chief of State. He is undoubtedly being used by this group. The more readily since he foresees for himself a more exalted and powerful role than that which he now enjoys as Chief of State with nominal powers. These ambitions are reflected in the projected draft constitution providing for a strong Chief of State along de Gaulle lines, which Suu has announced that he wishes to submit for referendum to the people, and by his call for early national elections. In the immediate situation he has been a willing tool of the opposition in raising constitutional and procedural questions in their confrontation with Quat.

The position of the military has been to withdraw progressively from the active political scene and to devote their efforts to fighting the war and putting their own house in order. The military appeared content with civilian rule so long as the government gave evidence that it could effectively maintain a degree of political stability and direct the affairs of state. Having withdrawn from the political scene under strong urging from Quat, the military have been loath to intervene actively in the current crisis. They much prefer to remain aloof in the current situation unless their intervention is officially requested or should prove necessary as they view the situation. However, the military leaders are upset and increasingly impatient at the apparent inability of the civilian elements to solve the current impasse. They desire above all a strong effective government and if prospects for this appear dim, they will undoubtedly move to assume power.

Prime Minister Quat's performance in the current crisis has not been reassuring. He has not projected an image either as a forceful leader or as an astute politician. In advancing his proposed cabinet reshuffle, he did not prepare the ground either with the Chief of State, the NLC, or the ministers concerned. When faced with the "constitutional issue," Quat did not seize the initiative nor utilize his strong assets. Had he done so, at the outset he could have forced the pace and probably achieved his objectives before the opposition was strongly organized. His failure to act decisively has fed the opposition and allowed them valuable time to develop their campaign. His chief asset has been support from the military. Quite understandably, he did not wish to inject the military into the picture during the early stages of the confrontation; however, he has not played this card effectively when events appeared to be running against him. In short, when faced with his first real challenge, Quat has been found to be indecisive—an almost fatal posture in the arena of jugular-vein politics in Saigon. Having said this, any realistic assessment must admit that Quat and his close associates constitute perhaps the best group on the scene at present. No single leader stands out as a clear alternative and no group exists which shows promise of handling the affairs of state much better.

Until late on 4 June, Quat faced two general orders of problems: (1) the constitutional challenge posed by Suu to his right to dismiss cabinet ministers, and (2) the vocal opposition to his government articulated by the Catholics, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Sudiste politicians. Although the second order of problem was brought to a focus by the [garble], the fact of public opposition remains, even though the constitutional problem appears to be on the way to settlement.

The Chief of State has been asked to intercede with the religious groups on Quat's behalf, but it is not yet clear whether he will in fact do so, or if he does, whether he will pursue the task with energy and with the Prime Minister's interests in mind. Nor is it clear how receptive the respective opposition groups will be to his approaches and those of Quat. The Catholics, for example, have up to the present given every evidence of implacable hostility to Quat, with indication that this disaffection exists to a degree within the Catholic hierarchy itself. The southern Catholics seem to be united with northern Catholics on this issue.

In considering our own options, it will be important to determine the depth and extent of the opposition to Quat now that the constitutional deadlock has been broken and after soundings have been taken with these groups by Suu and the GVN to determine whether their grievances can be satisfied. In the interim period, our course of action should be to urge on all sides (the GVN and the religions) the importance of arriving at an amicable accommodation. We will also have to bear in mind the interests of such groups as the United Buddhist Association, who will not be direct parties, to be sure that they are not given a cause for grievance.

If such an accommodation—imperfect and vulnerable though it be—can be reached, the immediate obstacle will have been surmounted and we can perhaps look forward to this government surviving for some time more. If, on the other hand, the opposing interests prove irreconcilable, or the military situation continues seriously to deteriorate, we will have to assess the situation in the light of the facts as they emerge and consider various alternatives, of which a more active military involvement in the political situation may be best from both political and military points of view.

Military Situation

After a two-month relative lull, evidently spent in regrouping, re-equipping and training, the Viet Cong have quickened the tempo of the fighting. Since early May, main force units have returned to the battlefield in increasing numbers, engaging in a number of attacks and ambushes with forces up to regimental size. While the months of March and April were relatively favorable for the government forces in terms of casualty and weapons loss ratios, the trend in May became less favorable as Viet Cong pressure mounted.

Captured documents indicate the Viet Cong have embarked on a new military campaign which will probably extend through the summer. Both Hanoi and Liberation Front broadcasts have heralded this new campaign as a demonstration of the Communists' will and determination to continue to press the war despite increased U.S. involvement in both North and South Vietnam. The apparent aims of this campaign are to alter the balance of military forces in favor of the Viet Cong by inflicting maximum attrition on the government forces, including specifically the piecemeal destruction of regular ARVN ground combat units where possible, and to extend Viet Cong control in rural areas by constricting GVN forces to the principal towns and cities. The pattern of Viet Cong operations to date indicates the campaign will be pressed vigorously in all military regions, the major attacks and ambushes will be accompanied by intensified, small-scale guerrilla activity, particularly sabotage and harassment of lines of communication, and that the Viet Cong intend to consolidate their rural gains through intensified subversion and political action. Increased terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel and installations in urban areas are also likely.

So far, the enemy has not employed his full capabilities in this campaign. Only two of the nine Viet Cong regiments have been heavily engaged (one in Phuoc Long and one in Quang Ngai), and probably only a similar proportion of their separate battalions has been committed. In most engagements, their main force units have displayed improved training and discipline, heavier firepower, and a willingness to take heavy losses if necessary to achieve their objectives. Their healthy respect for the effectiveness of U.S. and GVN tactical air support is reflected, however, in their reliance on ambush tactics instead of open assaults.

In pressing their campaign, the Viet Cong are capable of mounting regimental-size operations in all four ARVN Corps areas, and at least battalion-sized attacks in virtually any province. The larger attacks can be supported by a limited number of 70-mm or 75-mm artillery pieces. Known dispositions indicate major actions are likely in the near future in the Binh Duong-Phuoc Thanh-Phuoc Long area north of Saigon, in the Quang Ngai-Quang Tin area in central Vietnam, and in Kontum Province. Major attacks could occur also in other areas, since the Viet Cong have shown that they are capable of concentrating in regimental strength without giving significant warning.

While the Viet Cong remain numerically inferior in over-all strength, they can achieve temporary local superiority at times and places of their selection. Their ability to do this is facilitated by the commitment of a large portion of the RVNAF infantry-type battalions to relatively static missions, while the Viet Cong main force and local battalions are employed only in an offensive role. During periods of intensive activi-

ity, the Viet Cong thus enjoy the initiative in that they can choose the time, conditions, and place of engagement; significant contacts rarely occur, even when RVNAF units are engaged in aggressive operations, unless the Viet Cong elect to engage. By posing simultaneous or successive threats in widely separated areas, the Viet Cong have demonstrated an ability to offset [to] some extent ARVN's superior transportation resources.

Despite severe losses on occasion, Viet Cong forces have shown a remarkable recuperative ability. This has been facilitated by a systematic recruiting effort and an evidently effective replacement system, supplemented by the infiltration of northern draftees who have been integrated into Viet Cong units in the northern provinces. Access for recruiting purposes to the major portion of the population has enabled the Viet Cong not only to replace their losses but to continue to form new units. In addition to elements of the PAVN 325th Division already identified in the South, other units of this division and the PAVN 304th Division may already have entered or are stationed in the Laos border area. These elements represent a significant reinforcement capability for Viet Cong units in the I and II Corps areas.

Although GVN forces generally have responded well to the increased Viet Cong pressure, there have been several disturbing instances of poor performance in critical situations. Some units have broken under pressure and fled from the battlefield. These manifestations, coupled with the continuing high desertion rate in many units, reflect a generally marginal state of morale. The morale and confidence of the Officer Corps were buoyed up by the more direct involvement of U.S. forces since February. This improved spirit was enhanced by the period of relative inactivity of the Viet Cong main force units. The growing realization, however, that the increased U.S. commitment would not produce an immediate end to the war, together with ARVN's apparent inability to cope decisively as yet with the renewed Viet Cong offensive, apparently has caused morale to sag again. Unless the anticipated Viet Cong major attacks are effectively countered, morale will deteriorate further. Indeed, the cumulative psychological impact of a series of significant ARVN defeats could lead to a collapse in ARVN's will to continue to fight, despite the presence in South Vietnam of U.S. forces. To ward against the possibility of such a collapse, it will probably be necessary to commit US ground forces to action.

Conclusions:

1. The Communist leadership in Hanoi has not yet been shaken in its determination to continue the war. It apparently has elected to respond to the growing commitment of U.S. military resources in Vietnam by employing their principal weapon—the Viet Cong ground force reinforced by PAVN—in intensified operations in the South.

2. Having resumed major offensive actions in South Vietnam, the enemy is capable of continuing the recent pace of attacks and ambushes over the next several months, although there will probably be local cyclical fluctuations in the level activity. While the Viet Cong have suffered heavy losses, they have generally achieved their objectives in actions to date.

3. RVNAF general reserves have been barely adequate to deal with any one major thrust and are inadequate to counter simultaneous or successive thrusts in widely separated areas. Taking advantage of terrain and weather conditions, the Viet Cong appear likely to achieve further successes. To meet the shortage of ARVN reserves, it will probably be necessary to commit U.S. ground forces to action.

4. Further military reverses, coupled with the economic disruption caused by the harassment and blocking of lines of communication, will have a serious adverse impact on popular confidence and morale, exacerbating political instability in Saigon.

5. The political situation remains essentially unstable. Although the constitutional impasse appears to have been resolved, the Quat government continues to be faced with the difficult task of reaching an accommodation with strong opposition groups seeking its ouster and its life line is of uncertain length. The military and political situations are closely interrelated, and reverses in either area will have an adverse reaction in the other.