

Memo From Rostow Advocating Ground Troops and Air Attacks

Memorandum from Mr. Rostow to Secretary Rusk, Nov. 23, 1964, "Some Observations as We Come to the Crunch in Southeast Asia."

I leave for Lima this Saturday for the CIAP and CIES meetings. I presume that in early December some major decisions on Southeast Asia will be made. I should, therefore, like to leave with you some observations on the situation. I have already communicated them to Bill Bundy.

1. We must begin by fastening our minds as sharply as we can around our appreciation of the view in Hanoi and Peiping of the Southeast Asia problem. I agree almost completely with SNIE 10-3-64 of October 9. Here are the critical passages:

"While they will seek to exploit and encourage the deteriorating situation in Saigon, they probably will avoid actions that would in their view unduly increase the chances of a major US response against North Vietnam (DRV) or Communist China. We are almost certain that both Hanoi and Peiping are anxious not to become involved in the kind of war in which the great weight of superior US weaponry could be brought against them. Even if Hanoi and Peiping estimated that the US would not use nuclear weapons against them, they could not be sure of this. . . .

"In the face of new US pressures against the DRV, further actions by Hanoi and Peiping would be based to a considerable extent on their estimate of US intentions, i.e., whether the US was actually determined to increase its pressures as necessary. Their estimates on this point are probably uncertain, but we believe that fear of provoking severe measures by the US would lead them to temper their responses with a good deal of caution. . . .

"If despite Communist efforts, the US attacks continued, Hanoi's leaders would have to ask themselves whether it was not better to suspend their support of Viet Cong military action rather than suffer the destruction of their major military facilities and the industrial sector of their economy. In the belief that the tide has set almost irreversibly in their favor in South Vietnam, they might calculate that the Viet Cong could stop its military attacks for the time being and renew the insurrection successfully at a later date. Their judgment in this matter might be reinforced by the Chinese Communist concern over becoming involved in a conflict with US air and naval power."

Our most basic problem is, therefore, how to persuade them that a continuation of their present policy will risk major destruction in North Viet Nam; that a preemptive move on the ground as a prelude to negotiation will be met by US strength on the ground; and that Communist China will not be a sanctuary if it assists North Viet Nam in counter-escalation.

2. In terms of force dispositions, the critical moves are, I believe, these.

a. The introduction of some ground forces in South Viet Nam and, possibly, in the Laos corridor.

b. A minimal installation of the principle that from the present forward North Viet Nam will be vulnerable to retaliatory attacks for continued violation of the 1954-1962 Accords.

c. Perhaps most important of all, the introduction into the Pacific Theater of massive forces to deal with any escalatory response, including forces evidently aimed at China as well as North Viet Nam, should the Chinese Communists enter the game. I am increasingly confident that we can do this in ways which would be understood—and not dangerously misinterpreted—in Hanoi and Peiping.

3. But the movement of forces, and even bombing operations in the north, will not, in themselves, constitute a decisive signal. They will be searching, with enormous sensitivity, for the answer to the following question: Is the President of the United States deeply committed to reinstalling the 1954-1962 Accords; or is he putting on a demonstration of force that would save face for, essentially, a US political defeat at a diplomatic conference? Here their judgment will depend not merely on our use of force and force dispositions but also on the posture of the President, including commitments he makes to our own people and before the world, and on our follow-through. The SNIE accurately catches the extent of their commitments and their hopes in South Viet Nam and Laos. They will not actually accept a setback until they are absolutely sure that we really mean it. They will be as searching in this matter as Khrushchev was before he abandoned the effort to break our hold on Berlin and as Khrushchev was in searching us out on the Turkish missiles before he finally dismantled and removed his missiles from Cuba. Initial rhetoric and military moves will not be enough to convince them.

4. Given the fundamental assessment in this SNIE, I have no doubt we have the capacity to achieve a reinstallation of the 1954-1962 Accords if we enter the exercise with the same determination and staying power that we entered the long test on Berlin and the short test on the Cuba missiles. But it will take that kind of Presidential commitment and staying power.

5. In this connection, the SNIE is quite sound in emphasizing that they will seek, if they are permitted, either to pretend to call off the war in South Viet Nam, without actually doing so; or to revive it again when the pressure is off. (We can see Castro doing this now in Venezuela.) The nature of guerrilla war, infiltration, etc., lends itself to this kind of ambiguous letdown and reacceleration. This places a high premium on our defining precisely what they have to do to remove the pressure from the north. It is because we may wish to maintain pressure for some time to insure their compliance that we should

think hard about the installation of troops not merely in South Viet Nam south of the seventeenth parallel, but also in the infiltration corridor of Laos. The same consideration argues for a non-sanguinary but important pressure in the form of naval blockade which will be easier to maintain during a negotiation or quasi-negotiation phase than bombing operations.

6. The touchstones for compliance should include the following: the removal of Viet Minh troops from Laos; the cessation of infiltration of South Viet Nam from the north; the turning off of the tactical radio network; and the overt statement on Hanoi radio that the Viet Cong should cease their operations and pursue their objectives in South Viet Nam by political means. On the latter point, even if contrary covert instructions are given, an overt statement would have important political and psychological impact.

7. As I said in my memorandum to the President of June 6, no one can be or should be dogmatic about how much of a war we still would have—and for how long—if the external element were thus radically reduced or eliminated. The odds are pretty good, in my view, that, if we do these things in this way, the war will either promptly stop or we will see the same kind of fragmentation of the Communist movement in South Viet Nam that we saw in Greece after the Yugoslav frontier was closed by the Tito-Stalin split. But we can't proceed on that assumption. We must try to gear this whole operation with the best counter-insurgency effort we can mount with our Vietnamese friends outside the country; and not withdraw US forces from Viet Nam until the war is truly under control. (In this connection, I hope everyone concerned considers carefully RAND proposal of November 17, 1964, entitled "SIAT: Single Integrated Attack Team, A Concept for Offensive Military Operations in South Viet-Nam.")

8. I do not see how, if we adopt this line, we can avoid heightened pressures from our allies for either Chinese Communist entrance into the UN or for a UN offer to the Chinese Communists on some form of two-China basis. This will be livable for the President and the Administration if—but only if—we get a clean resolution of the Laos and South

Viet Nam problems. The publication of a good Jordan Report will help pin our allies to the wall on a prior reinstatement of the 1954 and 1962 Accords.

9. Considering these observations as a whole, I suspect what I am really saying is that our assets, as I see them, are sufficient to see this thing through if we enter the exercise with adequate determination to succeed. I know well the anxieties and complications on our side of the line. But there may be a tendency to underestimate both the anxieties and complications on the other side and also to underestimate that limited but real margin of influence on the outcome which flows from the simple fact that at this stage of history we are the greatest power in the world—if we behave like it.

10. In the President's public exposition of his policy, I would now add something to the draft I did to accompany the June 6 memorandum to the President. I believe he should hold up a vision of an Asian community that goes beyond the Mekong passage in that draft. The vision, essentially, should hold out the hope that if the 1954 and 1962 Accords are reinstated, these things are possible:

- a. peace;
- b. accelerated economic development;
- c. Asians taking a larger hand in their own destiny;
- d. as much peaceful coexistence between Asian Communists and non-Communists as the Communists wish.

11. A scenario to launch this track might begin as follows:

A. A Presidential decision, communicated to but held by the Congressional leaders. Some leakage would not be unhelpful.

B. Immediate movement of relevant forces to the Pacific.

C. Immediate direct communication to Hanoi to give them a chance to back down before faced with our actions, including a clear statement of the limits of our objectives but our absolute commitment to them.

D. Should this first communication fail (as is likely) installation of our ground forces and naval blockade, plus first attack in North, to be accompanied by publication up-dated Jordan Report and Presidential speech.