

McNaughton Draft for McNamara On 'Proposed Course of Action'

First draft of "Annex—Plan for Action for South Vietnam," appended to memorandum from John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, March 24, 1965.

1. US aims:

70%—To avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).
20%—To keep SVN (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.

10%—To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.

ALSO—To emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used.

NOT—To "help a friend," although it would be hard to stay in if asked out.

2. **The situation:** The situation in general is bad and deteriorating. The VC have the initiative. Defeatism is gaining among the rural population, somewhat in the cities, and even among the soldiers—especially those with relatives in rural areas. The Hop Tac area around Saigon is making little progress; the Delta stays bad; the country has been severed in the north. GVN control is shrinking to the enclaves, some burdened with refugees. In Saigon we have a remission: Quat is giving hope on the civilian side, the Buddhists have calmed, and the split generals are in uneasy equilibrium.

3. **The preliminary question:** Can the situation inside SVN be bottomed out

(a) without extreme measures against the DRV and/or (b) without deployment of large numbers of US (and other) combat troops inside SVN? The answer is perhaps, but probably no.

4. Ways GVN might collapse:

(a) VC successes reduce GVN control to enclaves, causing:

(1) insurrection in the enclaved population,

(2) massive defections of ARVN soldiers and even units,

(3) aggravated dissension and impotence in Saigon,

(4) defeatism and reorientation by key GVN officials,

(5) entrance of left-wing elements into the government,

(6) emergence of a popular-front regime,

(7) request that US leave,

(8) concessions to the VC, and

(9) accommodations to the DRV.

b) VC with DRV volunteers concentrate on I and II Corps,

(1) conquering principal GVN-held enclaves there,

(2) declaring Liberation Government

(3) joining the I & II Corps areas to the DRV, and

(4) pressing the course in (a) above for rest of SVN.

c) While in a temporary funk, GVN might throw in sponge:

(1) dealing under the table with VC,
(2) asking the US to cease at least military aid,

(3) bringing left-wing elements into the government,

(4) leading to a popular-front regime, and

(5) ending in accommodations to the VC and DRV.

d) In a surge of anti-Americanism, GVN could ask the US out and pursue course otherwise similar to (c) above.

5. **The "trilemma":** US policy appears to be drifting. This is because, while there is consensus that efforts inside SVN (para 6) will probably fail to prevent collapse, all three of the possible remedial courses of action have so far been rejected:

a. Will-breaking strikes on the North (para 7) are balked (1) by flash-point limits, (2) by doubts that the DRV will cave and (3) by doubts that the VC will obey a caving DRV. (Leaving strikes only a political and anti-infiltration nuisance.)

b. Large US troop deployments. (para 9) are blocked by "French-defeat" and "Korea" syndromes, and Quat is queasy. (Troops could be net negatives, and be besieged.)

c. Exit by negotiations (para 9) is tainted by the humiliation likely to follow.

Effort inside South Vietnam: Progress inside SVN is our main aim. Great, imaginative efforts on the civilian political as well as military side must be made, bearing in mind that progress depends as much on GVN efforts and luck as on added US efforts. While only a few of such efforts can pay off quickly enough to affect the present ominous deterioration, some may, and we are dealing here in small critical margins. Furthermore, such investment is essential to provide a foundation for the longer run.

a. Improve spirit and effectiveness. (fill out further, drawing from State memo to the President)

(1) Achieve governmental stability.

(2) Augment the psy-war program.

(3) Build a stronger pro-government infrastructure.

b. Improve physical security. (fill out)

c. Reduce infiltration. (fill out)

Strikes on the North (Program of Progressive Military Pressure)

a. Purposes:

(1) to reduce DRV/VC activities by affecting DRV will.

(2) To improve the GVN/VC relative "balance of morale."

(3) To provide the US/GVN with a bargaining counter.

(4) To reduce DRV infiltration of men and materiel.

(5) To show the world the lengths to which US will go for a friend.

b. Program: Each week, 1 or 2 "mission days" with 100-plane high-damage US-VNAF strikes each "day" against important targets, plus 3 armed reconnaissance missions—all moving upward in weight of effort, value of target or proximity to Hanoi and China.

ALTERNATIVE ONE: 12-week DRV-wide program shunning only "population" targets.

ALTERNATIVE TWO: 12-week program short of taking out Phuc Yen (Hanoi) airfield.

c. Other actions:

(1) Blockade of DRV ports by VNAF/US-dropped mines or by ships.

(2) South Vietnamese - implemented 34A MAROPS.

(3) Reconnaissance flights over Laos and the DRV.

(4) Daily BARREL ROLL armed reconnaissance strikes in Laos (plus T-28s),

(5) Four-a-week BARREL ROLL choke-point strikes in Laos.

(6) US/VNAF air & naval strikes against VC ops and bases in SVN.

(7) Westward deployment of US forces.

(8) No de Soto patrols or naval bombardment of DRV at this time.

d. Red "flash points." There are events which we can expect to imply substantial risk of escalation.

(1) Air strikes north of 17°. (This one already passed.)

(2) First US/VNAF confrontation with DRV MIGs.

(3) Strike on Phuc Yen MIG base near Hanoi.

(4) First strikes on Tonkin industrial/population targets.

(5) First strikes on Chinese railroad near China.

(6) First US/VNAF confrontation with Chicom MIGs.

(7) First hot pursuit of Chicom MIGs into China.

(8) First flak-suppression of Chicom or Soviet-manned SAM.

(9) Massive introduction of US ground troops into SVN.

(10) US/ARVN occupation of DRV territory (e.g., Ile de Tigre).

(11) First Chi/Sov-US confrontation or sinking in blockade.

e) Blue "flash points." China/DRV surely are sensitive to events which might cause us to escalate.

(1) All of the above "red" flash points.

(2) VC ground attack on Danang

(3) Sinking of a US naval vessel.

(4) Open deployment of DRV troops into South Vietnam.

(5) Deployment of Chinese troops into North Vietnam.

(6) Deployment of FROGs or SAMs in North Vietnam.

(7) DRV air attack on South Vietnam.

(8) Announcement of Liberation Government in I/II Corps area.

f. Major risks:

(1) Losses to DRV MIGs, and later possibly to SAMs.

(2) Increased VC activities, and possibly Liberation Government.

(3) Panic or other collapse of GVN from under us.

(4) World-wide revulsion against us (against strikes, blockades, etc.).

(5) Sympathetic fires over Berlin, Cyprus, Kashmir, Jordan waters.

(6) Escalation to conventional war with DRV, China (and USSR?)

(7) Escalation to the use of nuclear weapons.

g. Other Red moves:

(1) More jets to NVN with DRV or Chicom pilots.

(2) More AA (SAMs?) and radar gear (Soviet-manned?) to MVN.

(3) Increased air and ground forces in South China.

(4) Other "defensive" DRV retaliation (e.g., shoot-down of a U-2)

(5) PL land grabs in Laos.

(6) PL declaration of new government in Laos.

(7) Political drive for "neutralization" of Indo-China.

h. Escalation control. We can do three things to avoid escalation too-much or too-fast:

(1) Stretch out. Retard the program (e.g., 1 not 2 fixed strikes a week).

(2) Circuit breaker. Abandon at least temporarily the theory that our strikes are intended to break DRV will, and "plateau" them below the "Phuc Yen Airfield" flash point on one or the other of these tenable theories:

(a) That we strike as necessary to interdict infiltration.

(b) That our level of strikes is generally responsive to the level of VC/DRV activities in South Vietnam.

(3) Shunt. Plateau the air strikes per para (2) and divert the energy into:

(a) A mine—and/or ship-blockade of DRV ports.

(b) Massive deployment of US (and other?) troops into SVN (and Laos?):

(1) To man the "enclaves", releasing ARVN forces.

(2) To take over Pleiku, Kontum, Darlac provinces.

(3) To create a [word illegible] sea-Thailand infiltration wall.

i. Important miscellany:

(1) Program should appear to be relentless (i.e., possibility of employing "circuit-breakers" should be secret).

(2) Enemy should be kept aware of our limited objectives.

(3) Allies should be kept on board.

(4) USSR should be kept in passive role.

(5) Information program should preserve US public support.

Program of Large US Ground Effort in SVN and SEA.

a. Purposes:

(1) To defeat the VC on the ground.

(2) To improve GVN/VC relative "morale balance."

(3) To improve US/GVN bargaining position.

(4) To show world lengths to which US will go to fulfill commitments.

b. Program:

(1) Continue strike-North "crescendo" or "plateau" (para 7 above.)

(2) Add any "combat support" personnel needed by MACV; and (3) Deploy remainder of the III Marine Expeditionary Force to Danang; and (4) Deploy one US (plus one Korean?) division to defeat VC in Pleiku-Kontum-Darlac area, and/or (5) Deploy one US (plus one Korean?) division to hold enclaves (Bien Hoa/Ton Son Nhut, Nha Trang, Qui Non, Pleiku); and/or (6) Deploy 3-5 US divisions (with "international" elements) across Laos-SVN infiltration routes and at key SVN population centers.

c. Advantages:

(1) Improve (at least initially) manpower ratio vs. the VC.

(2) Boost GVN morale and depress DRV/VC morale.

(3) Firm up US commitment in eyes of all Reds, allies and neutrals.

(4) Deter (or even prevent) coups in the South.

d. Risks:

(1) Deployment will suck Chicom troops into DRV.

(2) Deployment will suck counterbalancing DRV/Chinese troops into SVN.

(3) Announcement of deployment will cause massive DRV/Chicom effort preemptively to occupy new SVN territory.

(4) US losses will increase.

(5) Friction with GVN (and Koreans?) over command will arise.

(6) GVN will tend increasingly to "let the US do it."

(7) Anti-US "colonialist" mood may increase in and outside SVN.

(8) US forces may be surrounded and trapped.

e. Important miscellany:

(1) There are no obvious circuit-breakers. Once US troops are in, it will be difficult to withdraw them or to move them, say, to Thailand without admitting defeat.

(2) It will take massive deployments (many divisions) to improve the GVN/US:VC ratio to the optimum 10+:1.

(3) In any event, our Project 22 planning with the Thais for defense of the Mekong towns must proceed apace.

Exit by Negotiations

a. Bargaining counters.

(1) What DRV could give:

(a) Stop training and sending personnel to SVN/Laos.

(b) Stop sending arms and supplies into SVN/Laos.

(c) Stop directing military actions into SVN/Laos.

(d) Order the VC/PL to stop their insurgencies.

(e) Stop propaganda broadcasts to South Vietnam.

(f) Remove VM forces and cadres from SVN and Laos.

(g) See that VC/PL stop incidents in SVN and Laos.

(h) See that VC/PL cease resistance.

(i) See that VC/PL turn in weapons and bases.

(j) See that VC/PL surrender for amnesty/expatriation.

(2) What GVN/US could give:

(a) Stop (or not increase) air strikes on DRV.

(b) Remove (or not increase) US troops in SVN.

(c) Rice supply to DRV.

(d) Assurance that US/GVN have no designs on NVN.

(e) Assurance that US/GVN will not demand public renunciation by the DRV of Communist goals.

(f) Assurance that "peaceful co-existence (e.g., continuation of Red propaganda in SVN) is acceptable.

(g) Capitulation: Leftists in GVN, coalition government, and eventual incorporation of SVN into DRV.

b. Possible outcomes.

(1) Pacified non-Communist South Vietnam.

(2) "Laotian" solution, with areas of de facto VC dominion, a "government

of national unity," and a Liberation Front ostensibly weened from DRV control.

(3) Explicit partition of SVN, with each area under a separate government.

(4) A "semi-equilibrium"—a slow-motion war—with slowly shifting GVN-VC lines.

(5) Loss of SVN to the DRV.

c. Techniques to minimize impact of bad outcomes. If/when it is estimated that even the best US/GVN efforts mean failure ("flash" or defeat), it will be important to act to minimize the after-damage to US effectiveness and image by steps such as these:

(1) Publicize uniqueness of congenital impossibility of SVN case (e.g., Viet Minh held much of SVN in 1954, long sieve-like borders, unfavorable terrain, no national tradition, few administrators, mess left by French, competing factions, Red LOC advantage, late US start, etc.).

(2) Take opportunity offered by next coup or GVN anti-US tantrum to "ship out" (coupled with advance threat to do so if they fail to "shape up").

(3) Create diversionary "offensives" elsewhere in the world (e.g., to shore up Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, India, Australia; to launch an "anti-poverty" program for underdeveloped areas).

(4) Enter multi-nation negotiations calculated to shift opinions and values.

d. Risks. With the physical situation and the trends as they are the fear is overwhelming that an exit negotiated now would result in humiliation for the US.

Evaluation: It is essential—however badly SEA may go over the next 1-3 years—that US emerge as a “good doctor.” We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly. We must avoid harmful appearances which will affect judgments by, and provide pretexts to, other nations regarding how the US will behave in future cases of particular interest to those nations—regarding US policy, power, resolve and competence to deal with their problems. In this connection, the relevant audiences are the Communists (who must feel strong pressures), the South Vietnamese (whose morale must be buoyed), our allies (who must trust us as “underwriters”) and the US public (which must support our risk-taking with US lives and prestige).

Urgency: If the strike-North program (para 7) is not altered: we will reach the MIG/Phuc Yen flash point in approximately one month. If the program is altered only to stretch out the crescendo: up to 3 months may be had before that flash point, at the expense of a less persuasive squeeze. If the program is altered to “plateau” or dampen the strikes: much of their negotiating value will be lost. (Furthermore, there is now a hint of flexibility on the Red side: the Soviets are struggling to find a Gordian

knot-cutter; the Chicoms may be wavering (Paris 5326).)

Possible Course

- (1) Redouble efforts inside SVN (get better organized for it).
- (2) Prepare to deploy US combat troops in phases, starting with one Army division at Pleiku and a Marine MEF at Danang.
- (3) Stretch out strike-North program, postponing Phuc Yen until June (exceed

flash points only in specific retaliations).

(4) Initiate talks along the following lines, bearing in mind that formal partition, or even a “Laos” partition, is out in SVN; we must break the VC back or work out an accommodation.

PHASE ONE TALKS:

- (A) When: Now, before an avoidable flash point.
- (B) Who: US-USSR, perhaps also US-India. (Not with China or Liberation Front; not through UK or France or U Thant; keep alert to possibility that GVN officials are talking under the table.)
- (C) How: With GVN consent, private, quiet (refuse formal talks).
- (D) What:

(1) Offer to stop strikes on DRV and withhold deployment of large US forces in trade for DRV stoppage of infiltration, communications to VC, and VC attacks, sabotage and terrorism, and for withdrawal of named units in SVN.

2. Compliance would be policed unilaterally. If as is likely, complete compliance by the DRV is not forthcoming, we would carry out occasional strikes.

(3) We make clear that we are not demanding cessation of Red propaganda nor a public renunciation by Hanoi of its doctrines.

(4) Regarding “defensive” VC attacks—i.e., VC defending VC-held areas from encroaching ARVN forces—we take the public position that ARVN forces must be free to operate throughout SVN, especially in areas where amnesty is offered (but in fact, discretion will be exercised).

(5) Terrorism and sabotage, however, must be dampened markedly throughout the country, and civilian administrators must be free to move and operate freely, certainly in so-called contested areas (and perhaps even in VC base areas).

PHASE TWO TALKS:

- (A) When: At the end of Phase One.
- (B) Who: All interested nations.
- (C) How: Publicly in large conference.
- (D): What:

(1) Offer to remove US combat forces from South Vietnam in exchange for repatriation (or regroupment?) of DRV infiltrators and for erection of international machinery to verify the end of infiltration and communication.

(2) Offer to seek to determine the will of the people under international supervision, with an appropriate reflection of those who favor the VC.

(3) Any recognition of the Liberation Front would have to be accompanied by disarming the VC and at least avowed VC independence from DRV control.

PHASE THREE TALKS: Avoid any talks regarding the future of all of Southeast Asia. Thailand's future should not be up for discussion; and we have the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords covering the rest of the area.

c. Special Points:

- (1) Play on DRV's fear of China.
- (2) To show good will, suspend strikes on North for a few days if requested by Soviets during efforts to mediate.
- (3) Have a contingency plan prepared to evacuate US personnel in case a para-9-type situation arises.
- (4) If the DRV will not “play” the above game, we must be prepared (a) to risk passing some flash points, in the Strike-North program, (b) to put more US troops into SVN, and/or (c) to reconsider our minimum acceptable outcome.