

# U.S. Mission's Recommendations On Further Military Steps

*Cablegram from the United States Mission in Saigon to the State Department, Aug. 18, 1964.*

This is US Mission message.

In preparing our reply, we have found it simpler to produce a new paper which undertakes to state the problem in South Viet Nam as we see it in two possible forms and then to provide course of action responding to each statement of the problem.

Underlying our analysis is the apparent assumption of Deptel 439 (which we believe is correct) that the present in-country pacification plan is not enough in itself to maintain national morale or to offer reasonable hope of eventual success. Something must be added in the coming months.

**Statement of the problem—A.** The course which US policy in South Viet Nam should take during the coming months can be expressed in terms of four objectives. The first and most important objective is to gain time for the Khanh government to develop a certain stability and to give some firm evidence of viability. Since any of the courses of action considered in this cable carry a considerable measure of risk to the US, we should be slow to get too deeply involved in them until we have a better feel of the quality of our ally. In particular, if we can avoid it, we should not get involved militarily with North Viet Nam and possibly with Red China if our base in South Viet Nam is insecure and Khanh's army is tied down everywhere by the VC insurgency. Hence, it is our interest to gain sufficient time not only to allow Khanh to prove that he can govern, but also

to free Saigon from the VC threat which presently rigns (as received) it and assure that sufficient GVN ground forces will be available to provide a reasonable measure of defense against any DRV ground reaction which may develop in the execution of our program and thus avoid the possible requirement for a major US ground force commitment.

A second objective in this period is the maintenance of morale in South Viet Nam particularly within the Khanh Government. This should not be difficult in the case of the government if we can give Khanh assurance of our readiness to bring added pressure on Hanoi if he provides evidence of ability to do his part. Thirdly while gaining time for Khanh, we must be able to hold the DRV in check and restrain a further buildup of Viet Cong strength by way of infiltration from the North. Finally, throughout this period, we should be developing a posture of maximum readiness for a deliberate escalation of pressure against North Viet Nam, using January 1, 1965 as a target D-Day. We must always recognize, however, that events may force US to advance D-Day to a considerably earlier date.

[Start of sentence illegible] we then need to design a course of action which will achieve the four objectives enumerated above. Such a course of action would consist of three parts: the first, a series of actions directed at the Khanh Government; the second, actions directed at the Hanoi Government; the third, following a pause of some duration, initiation of an orchestrated air attack against North Viet Nam.

In approaching the Khanh Government, we should express our willingness to Khanh to engage in planning and eventually to exert intense pressure on North Viet Nam, providing certain conditions are met in advance. In the first place before we would agree to go all out against the DRV, he must stabilize his government and make some progress in cleaning up his operational backyard. Specifically, he must execute the initial phases of the Hop Tac Plan successfully to the extent of pushing the Viet Cong from the doors of Saigon. The overall pacification program, including Hop Tac, should progress sufficiently to allow earmarking at least three division equivalents for the defense in I Corps if the DRV step up military operations in that area.

Finally we should reach some fundamental understandings with Khanh and his government concerning war aims. We must make clear that we will engage in actions against North Viet Nam only for the purpose of assuring the security and independence of South Viet Nam within the territory assigned by

the 1954 agreements; that we will not (rpt not) join in a crusade to unify the north and south; that we will not (rpt not) even seek to overthrow the Hanoi regime provided the latter will cease its efforts to take over the south by subversive warfare.

With these understandings reached, we would be ready to set in motion the following:

(1) Resume at once 34A (with emphasis on Marine operations) and Desoto patrols. These could start without awaiting outcome of discussions with Khanh.

(2) Resume U-2 overflights over all NVN.

(3) Initiate air and ground strikes in Laos against infiltration targets as soon as joint plans now being worked out with the Khanh Government are ready. Such plans will have to be related to the situation in Laos. It appears to US that Souvanna Phouma should be informed at an appropriate time of the full scope of our plans and one would hope to obtain his acquiescence in the anti-infiltration actions in Laos. In any case we should always seek to preserve our freedom of action in the Laotian corridor.

By means of these actions, Hanoi will get the word that the operational rules with respect to the DRV are changing. We should perhaps consider message to DRV that shooting down of U-2 would result in reprisals. We should now lay public base for justifying such flights and have plans for prompt execution in contingency to shoot down. One might be inclined to consider including at this state tit-for-tat bombing operations in our plans to compensate for VC depredations in SVN. However, the initiation of air attacks from SVN against NVN is likely to release a new order of military reaction from both sides, the outcome of which is impossible to predict. Thus, we do not visualize initiating this form of reprisal as a desirable tactic in the current plan but would reserve the capability as an emergency response if needed.

Before proceeding beyond this point, we should raise the level of precautionary military readiness (if not already done) by taking such visible measures as [word illegible] Hawk units to Danang and Saigon, landing a Marine force at Danang for defense of the airfield and beefing up MACV's support base. By this time (assumed to be late fall) we should have some reading on Khanh's performance.

Assuming that his performance has been satisfactory and that Hanoi has failed to respond favorably, it will be time to embark on the final phase of course of action A, a carefully orchestrated bombing attack on NVN directed primarily at infiltration and other military targets. At some point prior thereto it may be desirable to open direct communications with Hanoi if this not been done before. With all preparations made, political and military, the bombing program would begin, using US reconnaissance planes, VNAF/Farm-gate aircraft against those targets which could be attacked safely in spite of the presence of the MIG's and additional US combat aircraft if necessary for the effective execution of the bombing programs.

**Pros and cons of course of action—A.** If successful course of action A will accomplish the objectives set forth at the outset as essential to the support of US policy in South Viet Nam. I will press the Khanh Government into doing its homework in pacification and will limit the diversion of interest to the out-of-country ventures it gives adequate time for careful preparation estimated at several months, while doing sufficient at once to maintain internal morale. It also provides ample warning to Hanoi and Peking to allow them to adjust their conduct before becoming overcommitted.

On the other hand, course of action A relies heavily upon the durability of the Khanh government. It assumes that there is little danger of its collapse without notice or of its possible replacement by a weaker or more unreliable successor. Also, because of the drawn-out nature of the program it is exposed to the

danger of international political pressure to enter into negotiations before NVN is really hurting from the pressure directed against it.

**Statement of the Problem—B.** It may well be that the problem of US policy in SVN is more urgent than that depicted in the foregoing statement. It is far from clear at the present moment that the Khanh Government can last until January 1, 1965, although the application of course of action A should have the effect of strengthening the government [rest of sentence illegible].

[Start of sentence illegible] we would have to restate the problem in the following terms. Our objective avoid the possible consequences of a collapse of national morale. To accomplish these purposes, we would have to open the campaign against the DRV without delay, seeking to force Hanoi as rapidly as possible to resist from aiding the VC and to convince the DRV that it must cooperate in calling off the VC insurgency.

**Course of Action—B.** To meet this statement of the problem, we need an accelerated course of action, seeking to obtain results faster than under course of action A. Such an accelerated program would include the following actions:

Again we must inform Khanh of our intentions, this time expressing a willingness to begin military pressures against Hanoi at once, providing that he will undertake to perform as in course of action A. However, US action would not await evidence of performance.

Again we may wish to communicate directly on this subject with Hanoi or awaiting effect of our military actions. The scenario of the ensuing events would be essentially the same as under Course A but the execution would await only the readiness of plans to expedite

relying almost exclusively on US military means.

**Pros and cons of Course of Action B.** This course of action asks virtually nothing from the Khanh Government, primarily because it is assumed that little can be expected from it. It avoids the consequence of the sudden collapse of the Khanh Government and gets underway with minimum delay the punitive actions against Hanoi. Thus, it lessens the chance of an interruption of the program by an international demand for negotiation by presenting a fait accompli to international critics. However, it increases the likelihood of US involvement in ground action since Khanh will have almost no available ground forces which can be released from pacification employment to mobile resistance of DRV attacks.

**Conclusion:** It is concluded that Course of Action A offers the greater promised achievement of US policy objectives in SVN during the coming months. However, we should always bear in mind the fragility of the Khanh Government and be prepared to shift quickly to Course of Action B if the situation requires. In either case, we must be militarily ready for any response which may be initiated by NVN or by Chicoms.

**Miscellaneous:** as indicated above, we believe that 34A operations should resume at once at maximum tempo, still on a covert basis; similarly, Desoto patrols should begin advance, operating outside 12-mile limit. We concur that a number of VNAF pilots should be trained on B-57's between now and first of year. There should be no change now with regard to policy on evacuation of US dependents.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that USG adopt Course of Action A while maintaining readiness to shift to Course of Action B.