

State Department Study in Late '62 On Prospects in South Vietnam

Excerpts from research memorandum from Roger Hilsman, director of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, to Secretary of State Rusk, Dec. 3, 1962. The memorandum bore the title "The Situation and Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam" and a footnote said that the report was based on information available through Nov. 12, 1962.

... President Ngo Dinh Diem and other leading Vietnamese as well as many US officials in South Vietnam apparently believe that the tide is now turning in the struggle against Vietnamese Communist (Viet Cong) insurgency and subversion. This degree of optimism is premature. At best, it appears that the rate of deterioration has decelerated with improvement, principally in the security sector, reflecting substantially increased US assistance and GVN implementation of a broad counterinsurgency program.

The GVN has given priority to implementing a basic strategic concept featuring the strategic hamlet and systematic pacification programs. It has paid more attention to political, economic, and social counterinsurgency measures and their coordination with purely military measures. Vietnamese military and security forces—now enlarged and of higher quality—are significantly more offensive-minded and their counterguerilla tactical capabilities are greatly improved. Effective GVN control of the countryside has been extended slightly. In some areas where security has improved peasant attitudes toward the government appear also to have improved.

As a result, the Viet Cong has had to modify its tactics and perhaps set back its timetable. But the "national liberation war" has not abated nor has the Viet Cong been weakened. On the contrary, the Viet Cong has expanded the size and enhanced the capability and organization of its guerilla force—now estimated at about 23,000 in elite fighting personnel, plus some 100,000 irregulars and sympathizers. It still controls about 20 percent of the villages and about 9 percent of the rural population, and has varying degrees of influence among additional 47 percent of the villages. Viet Cong control and communication lines to the peasant have not been seriously weakened and the guerillas have thus been able to maintain good intelligence and a high degree of initiative, mobility, and strength

power. Viet Cong influence has almost certainly improved in urban areas not only through subversion and terrorism but also because of its propaganda appeal to the increasingly frustrated non-Communist anti-Diem elements.

The internal political situation is considerably more difficult to assess. Diem has strengthened his control of the bureaucracy and the military establishment. He has delegated a little more authority than in the past, and has become increasingly aware of the importance of the peasantry to the counterinsurgency effort. Nevertheless, although there are fewer reports of discontent with Diem's leadership within official circles and the civilian elite, there are still many indications of continuing serious concern, particularly with Diem's direction of the counterinsurgency effort. There are also reports that important military and civilian officials continue to participate in coup plots. Oppositionists, critics, and dissenters outside the government appear to be increasingly susceptible to neutralist, pro-Communist, and possibly anti-US sentiments. They are apparently placing increased reliance on clandestine activities.

The Viet Cong is obviously prepared for a long struggle and can be expected to maintain the present pace and diversity of its insurgent-subversive effort. During the next month or so, it may step up its military effort in reaction to the growing GVN-US response. Hanoi can also be expected to increase its efforts to legitimize its "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam" (NFLSV) and to prepare further groundwork for a "liberation government" in South Vietnam. On the present evidence, the Communists are not actively moving toward neutralization of South Vietnam in the Laos pattern, although they could seek to do so later. Elimination, even significant reduction, of the Communist insurgency will almost certainly require several years. In either case, a considerably greater effort by the GVN, as well as continuing US assistance, is crucial. If there is on-

tinuing improvement in security conditions, Diem should be able to alleviate concern and boost morale within the bureaucracy and the military establishment. But the GVN will not be able to consolidate its military successes into permanent political gains and to evoke the positive support of the peasantry unless it gives more emphasis to non-military aspects of the counterinsurgency program, integrates the strategic hamlet program with an expanded systematic pacification program, and appreciably modified military tactics (particularly those relating to large-unit actions and tactical use of airpower and artillery). Failure to do so might increase militant opposition among the peasants and their positive identification with the Viet Cong.

A coup could occur at any time, but

would be more likely if the fight against the Communists goes badly, if the Viet Cong launches a series of successful and dramatic operations, or if Vietnamese army casualties increase appreciably over a protracted period. The coup most likely to succeed would be one with non-Communist leadership and support, involving middle and top echelon military and civilian officials. For a time at least, the serious disruption of government leadership resulting from a coup would probably halt and possibly reverse the momentum of the government's counterinsurgency effort. The role of the US can be extremely important in restoring this momentum and in averting widespread fighting and a serious internal power struggle. . . .