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22 November 1966

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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE COMMUNIST BUILD-UP IN NORTHERN SOUTH VIETNAM

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

NRO REVIEW COMPLETED

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Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP79T00826A001400010060-4

Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP79T00826A001400010060-4

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
22 November 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Communist Build-up in Northern South Vietnam

Summary

The build-up of North Vietnamese forces in and around the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) has clearly been the most important strategic military move in Vietnam since the introduction of US combat troops. The build-up has now been under way for about six months and represents an attempt to extend North Vietnamese control across the Demilitarized Zone into northern Quang Tri Province.

The build-up has been pursued at considerable cost to the Communists in the destruction of both manpower and materiel. Currently, major elements of the Communist forces in Quang Tri are believed to have retreated into and just north of the DMZ to regroup for future operations.

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NOTE: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Research and Reports, the Office of National Estimates, and the Director's special assistant for Vietnamese affairs.

The creation of a stronghold in Quang Tri Province would offer the Communists many military advantages. For example, North Vietnamese troops in this area have considerably shorter supply lines than units operating farther south. A handy sanctuary from ground attack is also available in nearby Laos and in North Vietnam. Moreover, the occupation of northern Quang Tri Province by the Communists would strengthen their military position in countering any US attempt to block infiltration or to mount an invasion of the southern DRV.

One of major effects of the intensification of Communist operations in northern South Vietnam and the concomitant destruction of the neutrality of the DMZ has been to establish a base from which to fight a protracted war. This could be especially important if developments elsewhere in the South continue to go against the Communists. One of the aims of the protracted war strategy is to tie down a significant number of US and South Vietnamese units attempting to meet the threat posed by the build-up.

Despite the advantages to the Communists of operations in Quang Tri Province, they also face somewhat the same dilemma there which they have recently encountered elsewhere in South Vietnam in the operation of their main force elements. If they mount large-scale operations, they are highly vulnerable to allied air and ground firepower. Thus, they are almost forced to stay on the defensive, mounting only small attacks or probing actions in the hope of drawing allied ground forces into a position in which the sudden ambush or the fierce, but short, firefight can inflict high casualties on the allies. If they do return to Quang Tri in force during the next few months, the latter strategy is likely to be the one they will follow.

The Build-up

[REDACTED]

2. [REDACTED]

at least two unidentified units equivalent in size to regiments are believed to have infiltrated into western Quang Tri Province. Information on these additional units is quite limited, however, consisting of

[REDACTED]

3. Since early October, there have been only sporadic contacts with NVA elements in Quang Tri.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the major enemy elements--several of them hard hit by US ground and air attacks--have moved back into or just north of the DMZ. Company-size enemy elements, however, are still believed to be in the Quang Tri salient. The pattern of past and present Communist activity, moreover, suggests that the major Communist units are regrouping and reequipping in preparation for renewed large-scale infiltration into Quang Tri. The recent developments in Quang Tri are reminiscent of Communist operations in the central highlands adjacent to Cambodia. Communist units there have repeatedly moved back and forth across the Cambodian border, fighting at times and places of their own choosing, so as to cut the attrition rate on their own forces.

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[REDACTED]

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Military Advantages of the DMZ Build-up

6. Large-scale infiltration directly across the DMZ offered a number of significant military advantages to the Communists. In the first place, it greatly facilitated the movement into South Vietnam of a large enemy force in a short period of time. A

25X1 [redacted] for example, stated that his unit's trip-- from the northern edge of the DMZ into Quang Tri's mountainous interior--took only 12 days. In contrast, the trip through the Laotian corridor takes about 40 days, often even longer than that. The time factor may have been important in the decision to move in, since Hanoi may have been hoping to take advantage of the dislocation which followed the political unrest in April and May in the northern provinces.

7. Use of the DMZ route was considerably safer than the longer route through Laos. Communist troops were less exposed to the effects of airstrikes and

their commanders could exercise better command and control during the relatively short march. Moreover, the troops were less likely to come down with a debilitating sickness, [REDACTED] have indicated that high rates of sickness were a major concern of the Communists after their troops had been quartered in the Quang Tri jungle area for a short time.

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8. The movement of North Vietnamese troops into Quang Tri Province also strengthened the Communist military position for countering any US attempt to block infiltration from North to South Vietnam. Hanoi's concern over this possibility was first noted in late 1965 and early 1966 in its propaganda replay of press reports that the allies were planning an infiltration cordon from the South China Sea westward into Laos roughly along the Route 9 axis. It is probable that the build-up was designed, at least in part, to impede any such US move. Documents captured from units involved in the build-up declare an intention to cut through the allied position along Route 9.

9. It is also likely that the DMZ build-up is intended to strengthen North Vietnam's defenses against the threat of a US ground invasion of the DRV. This threat has been repeatedly voiced in recent months in North Vietnamese propaganda, public and private statements. It is thus probable that Hanoi considers there is some necessity for contingent planning against such an attack. Communist supply dumps, bivouac areas, and other military facilities in this area have been constructed or expanded. In addition, considerable priority is being given to keeping the roads open and in building new roads in the far southern DRV. Antiaircraft artillery sites have appeared in increasing numbers and some surface-to-air missile sites have also been introduced close to the DMZ.

10. The effect of the build-up on the North Vietnamese side of the border--which has included construction and expansion of military facilities--has been to increase the capacity for supporting Communist forces in the field in South Vietnam. By building up and securing the highlands in Quang Tri

and Thua Thien provinces, moreover, the Communists have obtained fairly firm control over a corridor which now extends from North Vietnam down into the central mountain area of South Vietnam. Although the movement of men and supplies along such a corridor is still difficult, it will provide an alternate infiltration route to the Laos panhandle. [redacted]

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[redacted] indicate that one intention of the build-up has been to establish new supply channels down into central South Vietnam.

Other Aspects of the Build-up

11. The Communist position in Quang Tri offers a formidable base area--in some of the worst fighting terrain in the country--from which the Communists can continue to protract the war, particularly since developments elsewhere in South Vietnam continue to go against them. With the sanctuary areas of Laos and North Vietnam at their backs, Communist forces are ideally suited to engage allied forces in the area at times and places of their own choosing. One of the basic concepts of the protracted war strategy is to tie down as large a number of enemy troops as possible. The Viet Cong had virtually achieved this objective in mid-1965 when the South Vietnamese military reserve was all but depleted. The large US build-up since that time has exacerbated this problem for the Communists; nevertheless, it continues to be a major facet of their strategy.

12. By committing large forces into Quang Tri Province, the Communists filled a vacuum in northern South Vietnam and also provoked a major US and South Vietnamese military response. Both major US Marine headquarters were moved north from their bases at Da Nang and Chu Lai to meet the growing Communist threat, along with six marine battalions. In addition, a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade has been moved to northern South Vietnam from the Saigon/Bien Hoa area to provide a defense for one of the marine base areas.

13. The marine preoccupation with northern Quang Tri Province has pulled a sizable number of troops away from pacification activities around their enclaves at Chu Lai and Da Nang. This could open up

opportunities for Communist guerrilla and local force units in harassing and sabotaging friendly installations.

14. The strategy of a protracted war has received increased attention in North Vietnamese propaganda since mid-1965. The Communists began to stress it at a time when their main forces in South Vietnam were losing the military initiative and were being placed on the defensive. The threat of a dry season offensive by the Viet Cong, particularly in the central highlands, was being effectively thwarted by US and GVN spoiling operations. Enemy activity, for the most part, was reduced to widespread terrorism, sabotage, and harassment. The theme also reappeared at about the time the 324th Division was beginning its preparations for infiltration.

15. It was about this time that a debate apparently started among top-level North Vietnamese leaders over basic military strategy in South Vietnam. The debate centered on the question of how best to defeat the US in the military sphere. Protagonists included Senior General and politburo member Nguyen Chi Thanh, who has been in South Vietnam directing the war, and, possibly, North Vietnam's long-time and popular Minister of Defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap. These two men, the only senior generals in the North Vietnamese Army, have been rivals for years. It appears that some of the Hanoi leaders, probably including Giap, questioned whether the insurgent forces were capable of maintaining their offensive in the face of the rapid US build-up. They suggested a shift to a basically defensive strategy--one that would prolong the war--which would emphasize the raiding and ambush tactics of the guerrilla. Regular forces were to be shielded from casualties and maintained at all costs.

16. The substance of the military debate involved, among other things, the question of the pace and emphasis of the Communist military effort in the South. Thanh argued forcefully in a July 1966 article published in the party journal that the proper strategy was to develop the ability to fight mobile warfare simultaneously throughout the country. He pointed to the period between mid-1964 and mid-1965 was the best

example of how this strategy works. During that period the Viet Cong were able, by launching nearly simultaneous attacks both in the highlands and in the flatlands around Saigon, to whipsaw the South Vietnamese military reserve to the point where by May 1965 the South Vietnamese forces were virtually exhausted.

17. The defensive advocates, on the other hand, seem to have opted for the creation of a strong, multi-divisional force, dug in and well supplied in a rather well-dispersed region backing up on a larger and safer rear area. Their tactic--based on their experience against the French--is to entice allied forces into the forward area of the base region, where entrenched Communist forces are able to inflict severe casualties upon the attacking forces. They will be willing, moreover, to use large numbers of men and to take heavy casualties as long as enough of the attacking force could be destroyed, thus requiring the allies to withdraw to their own base camp. Communist forces would then try to extend their base area or area of control and begin the same process all over again. This strategy also calls for intensive guerrilla warfare behind allied lines in order to tie down as many troops as possible. The enemy hopes by these tactics to stretch allied forces thin, holding down the number which can be committed to the assault on their major base areas.

18. It appears that the initial decision was made prior to the 1965-66 dry season in favor of Thanh's strategy of attempting to stay on the offensive with persistent and large-scale attacks on US forces. Communist forces, however, were unable to regain the initiative during the last dry season--a fact which probably led to the renewal of the debate in the spring of 1966. Given the recent developments near the DMZ, it appears possible that proponents of the return to defensive strategy are to be given a chance to prove their point in northern South Vietnam.

Outlook

19. The probable objective of Communist forces in the coming months in northern South Vietnam will

be to exact maximum attrition of US and GVN forces under conditions as favorable as possible to the Communists. In addition, the Communists will probably conduct attacks on isolated or lightly defended outposts such as the Khe Sanh Special Forces camp, and then try to ambush friendly reaction forces. Occasionally, larger battles may be fought if friendly forces can be drawn into the prepared Communist base areas between Route 9 and the DMZ. Communist forces will, of course, attempt to take advantage of any favorable tactical situation that may arise.

20. Despite the advantages to the Communists of operations in Quang Tri Province, they also face somewhat the same dilemma there which they have recently encountered elsewhere in South Vietnam in the operation of their main force elements. If they mount large-scale operations, they are highly vulnerable to allied air and ground firepower. Thus, they are almost forced to stay on the defensive, mounting only small attacks or probing actions in the hope of drawing allied ground forces into a position in which the sudden ambush or the fierce, but short, firefight can inflict high casualties on the allies. If they do return to Quang Tri in force during the next few months, the latter strategy is likely to be the one they will follow.

21. Alleged Communist plans to liberate Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, as reflected in [redacted]

[redacted] are more likely an exercise in propaganda rather than a valid strategic aim of the Communists. Any push in the near future by North Vietnamese forces against populated coastal centers in Quang Tri would almost certainly result in their defeat, in the face of US firepower superiority.

22. Nevertheless, the sizable Communist forces in this area still retain the capability to launch multiregimental and, perhaps, even multidivisional attacks against friendly forces. They are not believed capable, however, of logistically supporting a sustained offensive in the face of US air and firepower superiority. [redacted]

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Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP79T00826A001400010060-4

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Talking paper for the memorandum, "The Communist Build-up in Northern South Vietnam"

1. This memorandum was self-initiated by the Indochina Division, OOI, to focus on the build-up of Communist forces in Quang Tri Province, and to assess the significance of this development for the larger war effort.

2. The effect of the build-up, [redacted]

[redacted] has been to give the Communists another base area from which to fight a protracted war should developments elsewhere in South Vietnam continue to go against them.

3. The paper recounts the details of the build-up, and cites many of the military advantages that the Communists are realizing from operations in this area. These include a shortened infiltration route and expanded infiltration corridor, shortened logistic lines, and handy sanctuary areas in nearby Laos and North Vietnam.

4. It is recommended that the memorandum be given broad, general dissemination.

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