

The President's Daily Brief

April 3, 1975

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

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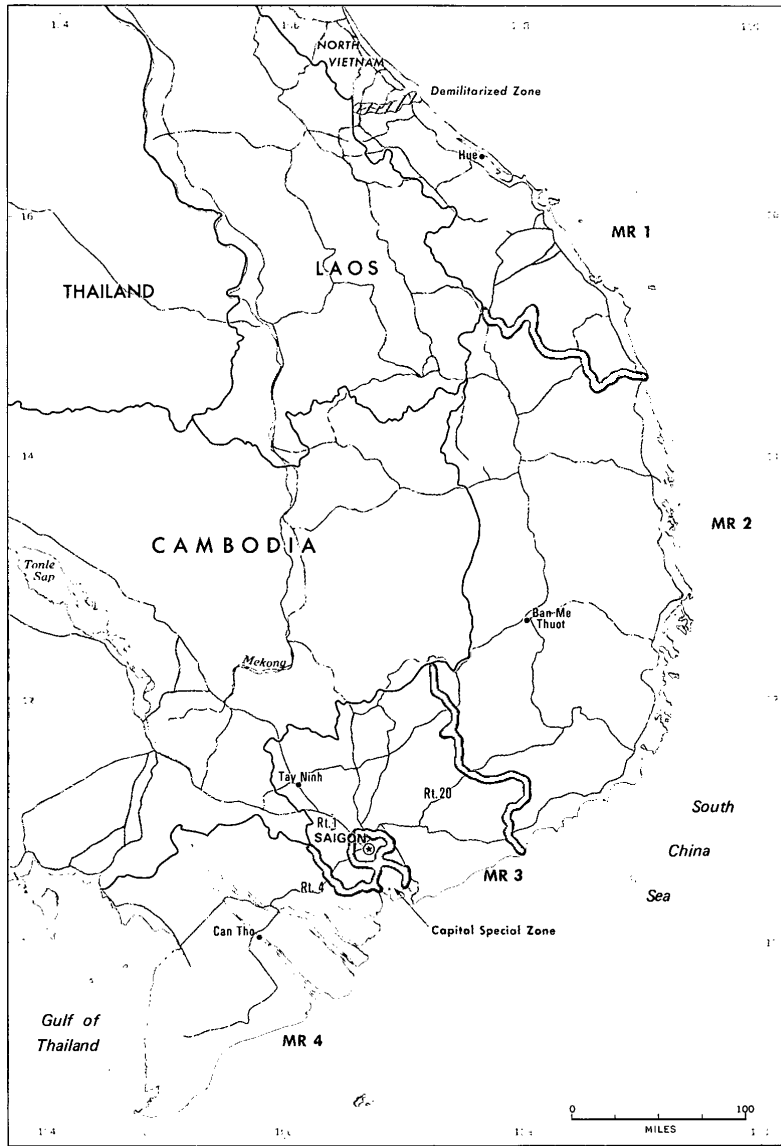
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VIETNAM

North Vietnam is continuing to send manpower to consolidate its hold over the northern two thirds of South Vietnam and to augment its forces around Saigon.

In addition to maintaining a moderately heavy rate of troop infiltration--more than 1,000 men per day and far more than is needed to replace losses--Hanoi has now dispatched the fourth of its seven strategic reserve divisions. The recent move south by the 338th follows the dispatch of the 320B Division--parts of which are already around Hue. These two divisions could arrive in Military Region 3 in less than two weeks, especially if they move down Route 1 to attack Saigon's eastern flank.

Hanoi sent south its first strategic reserve divisions during February. The 341st is now in the area north of Saigon and the 316th is in the southern portion of Military Region 2, where it helped capture Ban Me Thuot in mid-March. The other three strategic reserve divisions--the 308th, 308B, and the 312th--have remained in their normal bases in North Vietnam. There have been tenuous indications, however, that the 312th Division may be preparing to move south.

A large number of air defense units have moved to southern North Vietnam in conjunction with the shift of air defense forces already present in northern South Vietnam, and intercepts suggest Hanoi may be moving additional artillery or anti-aircraft--possibly as much as a full division--to the southern portion of South Vietnam.

Details on developments in military regions 1 and 2 are trickling south, despite the government's jamming of communist broadcasts and its efforts to prevent refugees from reaching major cities like Saigon and Can Tho.

The panic that contributed so much to the collapse in the north has not yet seized Saigon's troops in military regions 3 and 4. At the moment, the government has an edge in numbers of troops and

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in firepower, and, while the regional commanders are worried, they are trying to gird their forces near Saigon for a stand. The general commanding the 25th Division defending Tay Ninh city is staying with his division in the field, making personal visits to his units, and taking care to rotate his battalions from the front lines periodically. East of Saigon, the 18th Division has been conducting small, but successful, operations to reopen routes 1 and 20. In the delta, senior officers are apprehensive about a communist attack against Can Tho city, and are actively preparing their defenses. Their main concern is to protect the major towns and Route 4, which connects Saigon with its rice supplies.

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CAMBODIA

Cambodian army units around Phnom Penh can now do little more than react to communist initiatives, all the while suffering losses of territory and erosion of their defenses.

The Khmer communists are expected to shift an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 troops, previously committed to operations along the lower Mekong, to Phnom Penh's southern defenses within a week. Understrength government units in this sector probably cannot withstand attacks by such a force.

The communists are continuing to fire 107-mm. rockets at Pochentong Airport, and they resumed artillery fire yesterday. A DC-8 was hit by machine gun fire west of the airport.

Defenses northeast of Phnom Penh have been weakened because units have been withdrawn to reinforce the northwest. The communists broke into the defense perimeter at a point some five miles northwest of Phnom Penh last night; more government reinforcements have been sent to the area.

Communist forces overran a government position on the east bank of the Mekong on Tuesday. Farther north, government troops withdrew from a position on the east bank of the Tonle Sap. Defenders in this area are becoming increasingly vulnerable to numerically superior insurgent forces.

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THAILAND

The Thai do not believe that a communist take-over in Cambodia and Vietnam would pose an immediate threat to their own security, but they believe that the long-run implications will make it necessary for them to make foreign policy adjustments.

These adjustments are likely to include:

--Sharply accelerating Thailand's efforts to move away from identification with US policy in Indochina, a process that began several years ago.

--Exploring alternatives to Thailand's long reliance on the US for its security.

Khukrit Pramot's government, in office less than two weeks, has already signaled its intent to dissociate itself from US policies toward Indochina. Convinced that Phnom Penh's collapse is inevitable, Thai officials have made much publicly of opposing the US airlift of arms to Cambodia from bases in Thailand. [redacted] Prime Minister Khukrit is willing to look the other way while the flights continue, but this position could change suddenly if he feels himself under public pressure. His foreign minister already argues that halting the flights will put Thailand in a better position to deal with a communist regime in Phnom Penh.

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Some officials [redacted] [redacted] have begun to explore possible alternatives to reliance on the US for Thailand's security. Top policy planners in the Thai foreign ministry have concluded that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, still a fledgling regional organization, may be Thailand's only possible alternative. Foreign Minister Chatchai apparently has accepted their recommendation to convene an immediate meeting of the five nations of the association--the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand--to discuss the impact of the Indochina situation on their countries. In this forum, Chatchai will probably push his idea of getting the big powers to endorse Thailand's neutrality. This concept could easily be widened to include all of Southeast Asia.

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The Thai will probably make stronger efforts to improve relations with their communist neighbors. They may push ahead their timetable on recognition of Peking. There is evidence that in recent days the Thai have renewed their approaches to Hanoi in an effort to open a dialogue, although there is almost certainly little optimism in the Thai foreign ministry that such efforts will soon overcome Hanoi's basic hostility toward Bangkok.

US interests in Thailand are certain to come under critical scrutiny in the months ahead. The Khukrit government already is on record as favoring the withdrawal of all US forces from Thailand within one year. On this issue, too, Khukrit and Chatchai have indicated to US officials that the government's private position is more flexible than its public posture, but their views may stiffen once the impact of the situation in Indochina sinks in.

Even the Thai military, who have been the staunchest defenders of the US presence, have been expressing their disappointment in recent days that Thai-based US aircraft have not been sent into action over Indochina. Having long identified these aircraft with the US security commitment to Thailand, they may now begin to question the utility of keeping the US bases.

There is little reason to believe that a communist take-over in Indochina will cause the Thai to seek a complete reversal of their long-standing close relations with the US. The Thai continue to see even a limited US presence and involvement with Southeast Asia as a useful counterbalance to the interests of Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi. Moreover, the Thai still harbor immense goodwill toward Washington, and they will look to the US for basic support for their armed forces, especially badly needed spare parts.

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LAOS

Communist leader Souphanouvong has gained a role in connection with King Savang that may enhance Souphanouvong's stature as a national leader and potential next prime minister.

The coalition cabinet recently announced that King Savang has accepted Souphanouvong's invitation to pay an official visit to the communist zone this year, and that the King has also decided to be crowned formally no later than the end of 1976. Souphanouvong is to be in charge of arrangements for both the King's visit to Sam Neua, which may take place soon after the Lao New Year's festivities in mid-April, and for his coronation.

Since his accession to the throne in 1959, the King has maintained that he would be crowned only when Laos was unified under a single administration. The announcement that he now intends to proceed represents a sharp break with his past attitude and has little relationship to the real situation in the country.

The 67-year-old King, however, may have come to view a coronation--with Lao communist involvement--as a means of ensuring the survival of the monarchy beyond his reign. He may also feel that a visit to Sam Neua would be a symbolic gesture welcoming the Lao communists as loyal subjects back into the national fold.

The King's recently announced decisions probably evolved from lengthy discussions with Souphanouvong and Prime Minister Souvanna during the Prime Minister's extended convalescence in the royal capital of Luang Prabang. For his part, Souvanna probably is attracted to the idea of involving the King--who is held in awe and respect by all Lao groups and factions--in what could be major steps toward national reconciliation. Such an involvement might also help to dispel longstanding rightist distrust of the Lao communist leader and improve Souphanouvong's chances of being accepted by non-communists as a future head of government.

Souvanna has consistently maintained that Souphanouvong is more of a Lao nationalist than communist. Recent battlefield developments in South Vietnam and Cambodia will have only reinforced Souvanna's conviction that a policy of political accommodation with the Lao communists is the only alternative to a communist military takeover.

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EGYPT

In announcing Egypt's official request on Tuesday that the US and the USSR reconvene the Geneva conference, Foreign Minister Fahmi also expressed Cairo's desire that France, the UK, and "at least one" of the nonaligned countries participate. Fahmi recently met with the ambassadors of Yugoslavia and India to discuss a possible role by those countries in negotiations.

President Sadat fears that participation by only the US and the USSR would immediately doom the conference; the Soviets would support the Arabs and the US would back the Israelis. Sadat apparently believes that broader participation will place greater pressures on Israel and might provide a safeguard against what he calls "polarization" of the superpowers' positions at Geneva. He wants the US to play the role of mediator, not only defender of Israel, and he is equally determined to avoid having Moscow alone speak for the Arabs.

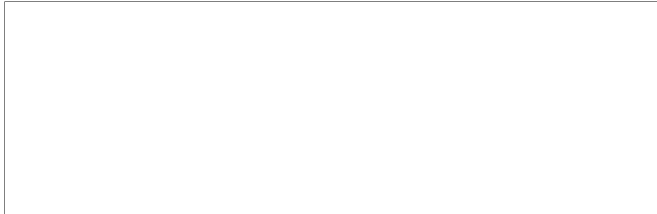
The addition of the other countries Sadat and Fahmi have mentioned would have the undoubted benefit for Egypt of stacking the deck against Israel. The French, the nonaligned countries, and to a lesser extent the British, support the basic tenets of the Arab position. The UK and France are nonetheless far less rigid in their backing of the Arabs than the Soviets, and Sadat may believe that their presence would prevent polarization and assure the US more room for maneuver in attempting to accommodate Arab as well as Israeli positions.

By being first on the list with a formal request for a reopened conference, the Egyptians undoubtedly also hope to steal a march on the Syrians and other Arabs who have disparaged Sadat's reliance on US mediation, and who will be still more suspicious of rumors that both Egypt and Israel are interested in reviving the bilateral talks.

Whatever Sadat's intentions, the addition of outside participants is likely to complicate rather than facilitate negotiations.

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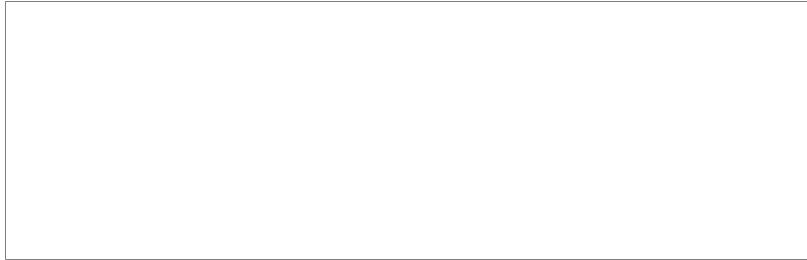
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NOTE

Returns from last weekend's municipal elections indicate that the urban electorate in Greece may lean more strongly toward the center-left parties than the parliamentary election last November suggested.

Candidates in the larger cities backed by the left opposition significantly outpolled conservatives and nonpartisans. The opposition has been trying to make political capital out of the results, even though these elections did not affect the government's overwhelming majority in Parliament. The strength of extreme leftist and centrist forces, which are collaborating at the moment, will be tested again in parliamentary by-elections on April 20.

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VIETNAM

We present below an intelligence community assessment of Likely Political Developments in Vietnam.

The political viability of the present government in South Vietnam has rested heavily on strong US support of President Thieu and his effective resistance to a communist takeover. To most Vietnamese, these conditions no longer exist. As a result we believe that major political changes will occur in coming weeks and may be imminent; these changes would eventually lead to a settlement on communist terms. If the South Vietnamese military situation is not stabilized, however, Saigon may collapse militarily before arrangements to replace Thieu or to attempt negotiations can materialize.

Thieu's prestige has been irreparably damaged by the military debacle in the northern half of the country and his effectiveness undermined by a growing sense of inevitable communist victory. Decisive and visible leadership is needed, but Thieu appears isolated from his own government and increasingly suspicious of the loyalty of his senior commanders. For example, he has placed Military Region 3 commander General Toan under surveillance since a meeting last weekend between Toan and General Weyand.

Thieu's suspicions are understandable; criticism of the president is mounting within the military establishment.

--The Chairman of the Joint General Staff, General Vien, reportedly is agitating in senior military circles for Thieu's removal.

--Close associates of the president, such as his Special Assistant for Military and Security Affairs, General Quang, appear deeply pessimistic over Thieu's ability to remain in power.

--General Truong, the Military Region 1 commander, is bitter over Thieu's decisions which led to the collapse of his command.

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We have no evidence, however, of a concrete move afoot within the military to replace Thieu. The most important point in the president's favor is the absence of any rival strong enough to oust the president and willing to step into his position. But, given the dissatisfaction that now exists within the military, a move to force Thieu's resignation or ouster by an individual or group of military officers could occur at any time. The likelihood of such a move will increase the longer political indecision continues and military deterioration is unarrested.

There is little agreement within the civilian opposition on a successor to Thieu. Former South Vietnamese leaders, such as Nguyen Cao Ky, Duong Van "Big" Minh, or former premier Pham Huy Quat, do not command enough support to serve as a rallying point. Moderate nationalists--such as labor leader Tran Quoc Buu, Senator Tran Van Lam, and Deputy Prime Minister Pham Quang Dan--who have continued to support Thieu while maintaining a degree of independence, probably hope that a new military successor government would have a place for them. But they are not likely to be prime movers in any immediate change of political leadership in Saigon. The more radical opposition leaders such as the An Quang Buddhists' Thich Tri Quang and the militant Catholic priest Father Thanh could precipitate an early military move if they take to the streets in all-out opposition to Thieu.

Thieu's departure would not in itself necessarily lead to an immediate unraveling of South Vietnamese morale and will to resist. A new military leadership, perhaps with some infusion of civilian opposition elements to broaden its base, might make at least temporary headway in shoring up public confidence and rallying the South Vietnamese armed forces. But in our judgment, such a change of leadership at this time could not reverse the fundamental political and military trends now running against Saigon. Even if the South Vietnamese are successful in rallying their forces and consolidating their immediate military position, the respite will be brief because Hanoi now is deploying overwhelming military force for a *coup de grace*.

Given this situation, defeatist sentiment in South Vietnam is bound to snowball. This process is already well under way as refugees and news of successive military reverses trickle south. As a consensus begins to emerge in Saigon that communist victory is in sight, there should be no shortage of

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individuals eager to protect their personal interests or their various political and religious groups as best they can by participating in a settlement on communist terms. In time, we believe mounting demoralization will lead to military acquiescence in the formation of another government prepared to seek and accept the best terms it can obtain from the communists. In the event of a rapid South Vietnamese military collapse, however, even the possibility of a transitional non-communist administration would disappear.

One by-product of the demoralization process now under way has been a rising level of anti-American feeling. Anti-US feeling already appears to be running high among the military units and refugees escaping from the north. As hope for more US assistance fades, President Thieu or any successor would have little reason to resist the temptation to point to US responsibility for the present situation.

The Communist View

Hanoi almost certainly was surprised by the extent and rapidity of the South Vietnamese military collapse. The tone of its propaganda and the speed with which it has redeployed its forces to take advantage of the South Vietnamese retreat, however, make it apparent that Hanoi now sees victory as certain. Indeed, Hanoi is continuing to move additional elements of its strategic reserve to the South.

Hanoi clearly senses that the possibility of a final psychological and political collapse in the South would allow it to realize its final objectives without the cost of a major assault against Saigon. The communists are offering amnesty to South Vietnamese military and government personnel who join the "revolutionary side." And in an obvious effort to encourage political upheaval in Saigon, the communists have been emphasizing their willingness to reopen negotiations. Hanoi is indicating, however, that the cost of peace will be high--Thieu must be removed and a new South Vietnamese government formed that is prepared to accept "national concord and strict application of the Paris Agreement" before negotiations can begin. Furthermore, communist statements make no mention of the coalition government envisioned by the Paris Agreement, but only declare that new negotiations would result "in the speedy settlement of the affairs of South Vietnam."

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This terse offer reflects the radically altered strategic situation in Vietnam. Hanoi no longer sees the need for a lengthy intermediate stage of negotiations and coalition rule in the South prior to the achievement of its basic objective--the unification of Vietnam under communist rule. Although North Vietnamese strategy probably still involves the establishment of a transitional southern government, perhaps with token participation by neutralist "third force" elements, it seems fairly clear that Hanoi is now interested in providing only the merest fig leaf for a North Vietnamese takeover in the South.

In the event of such an arrangement, there would undoubtedly be a fairly widespread elimination of key South Vietnamese government and armed forces personnel, particularly those who had been closely associated with the US. In addition, many thousands of others would be killed, either by conscious communist policy or by the action of zealous local communist commanders and troops. The prospect would generate massive efforts to escape Vietnam, involving hundreds of thousands of people. Nonetheless, the communists would be faced with the massive problems of trying to re-establish order out of chaos and panic, and they would probably keep some functionaries in place for the task.

Hanoi's shortened timetable in the South has obvious implications for the role of the Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government. We believe that there has been a basic downgrading of the provisional government in North Vietnamese thinking. The North Vietnamese will soon have little incentive to maintain it as a separate political entity.

We believe Hanoi intends to push its military advantage forcefully, but we are unsure as to the exact timing. We expect sharp communist attacks in the provinces around Saigon and in the delta in the next few weeks and believe that the communists intend to maintain or escalate military pressure. We believe that in a matter of months, if not weeks, Saigon will collapse militarily or a government will be installed that will agree to a settlement on communist terms.

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