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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*Future Communist Military Strategy
in South Vietnam*

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27 February 1968

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WARNING

This document contains classified information affecting the national security of the United States within the meaning of the espionage laws, US Code Title 18, Sections 793, 794, and 798.



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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
27 February 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Future Communist Military Strategy in South VietnamSummary

Developments during the past few weeks have made it clear that the Communists now plan to put extensive and sustained military pressure on the urban areas of South Vietnam. At a maximum, they hope to move in and control some of the major cities; failing this, they will try to bring about a deterioration of governmental authority in urban areas, as well as in the countryside. They would hope that the disintegration of the government position eventually would force a political accommodation in the war on Communist terms.

During the last few weeks there have also been a number of indications, apart from the attacks on the cities, that additional shifts in Communist war strategy are in process. Among these has been evidence of plans to use the limited North Vietnamese air arm in a logistic or attack role in South Vietnam. New Communist weapons including tanks and possibly better artillery rockets have appeared in the DMZ area. Signs pointing to additional troop infiltration to the South have been noted, while the flow of supplies to the DMZ and down the Lao corridor has continued at a stepped-up pace. Additional enemy road building has also been under way which will improve the Communists' ability to support military units in both the DMZ and the coastal area of the two northern provinces in South Vietnam.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and was coordinated with the Office of Economic Research, the Office of National Estimates, and the Director's Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs.

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The developments suggest that the enemy is trying to get in a position throughout the two northern provinces which will permit him to conduct sustained offensive operations, probably along more conventional military lines than ever before in the war. Recently the bulk of one division of Communist troops from the DMZ area has slipped south into the coastal plains of Quang Tri and, along with NVA elements already in the sector, will probably attempt a gradual, but sustained campaign, to erode and destroy friendly control over the rural population and the cities in the area. It also appears that the Communists are going to make a major effort to hold positions around the city of Hue, invest or capture Quang Tri, and, if possible, gain de facto administrative control over Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces.

Continued pressure on the allied bastion at Khe Sanh is likely in the course of the Communist effort in the north, with the enemy seeking to tie down a substantial allied reaction force. Whether Hanoi will make an all-out effort to overrun the base remains to be seen; there is some evidence in the recent shift of Communist troops to the eastward that the enemy may be reducing his forces somewhat in the general vicinity of Khe Sanh. On the other hand, there is evidence of continuing enemy preparations for a ground assault against the base, should the prospects for success appear promising.

We believe the most likely course of over-all enemy action in Vietnam during the near term will revolve around a major effort in the north combined with selective pressure in the central highlands and against the urban areas farther south. The pressure against the cities will include both limited ground probes and coordinated attacks by fire. We think it likely the enemy will make a special effort, partly for political and psychological reasons, to harass and disrupt the city of Saigon. Should security in the city deteriorate, the enemy could decide to move in again with major forces.

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The Communists will also be heavily engaged in trying to consolidate the gains they have made throughout the rural areas of the country since the government's retreat to defend the cities. In particular, they will attempt to destroy much that has been achieved in the pacification/RD program, and will utilize renewed access to the rural population to intensify recruitment efforts and the collection of taxes and other forms of logistic support.

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Recent Enemy Activities

1. New Weapons: There have been many indications in recent weeks that the North Vietnamese now plan to use their limited air arm in an offensive and/or logistic role to support the war in South Vietnam. Radar and communications facilities have been established in North Vietnam's southern provinces since the first of the year which would permit Hanoi-based MIGs to intercept B-52 flights in the DMZ area.

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The enemy has used significant new weapons on the ground in northern South Vietnam. In addition to the surface-to-air missile units positioned just north of the DMZ, Hanoi has introduced a number of antiaircraft artillery units around Khe Sanh and in the A Shau valley which may be equipped with weapons as large as the 37-mm. AAA gun. Other ground weapons which have been discovered in Communist hands since the first of the year include an extended range 122-mm. rocket supplied by the Soviet Union and a new, highly portable, 107-mm. rocket provided by the Chinese.

3. Perhaps the most significant development in Communist weaponry in recent weeks has been the introduction of armor. PT-76 amphibious tanks spearheaded the drive against Lang Vei near Khe Sanh and have recently been sighted in the eastern sector of the DMZ.

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enemy armor units just north of the DMZ in the Vinh Linh area and on a new road the Communists are building between the A Shau valley and Hue. Unconfirmed agent reports credit the enemy with tanks in the western highlands in a position to threaten Kontum and Pleiku. On 26 February a US special forces detachment engaged an enemy unit 65 miles northwest of Saigon which was equipped with three armored vehicles, initially reported as T-34 tanks.

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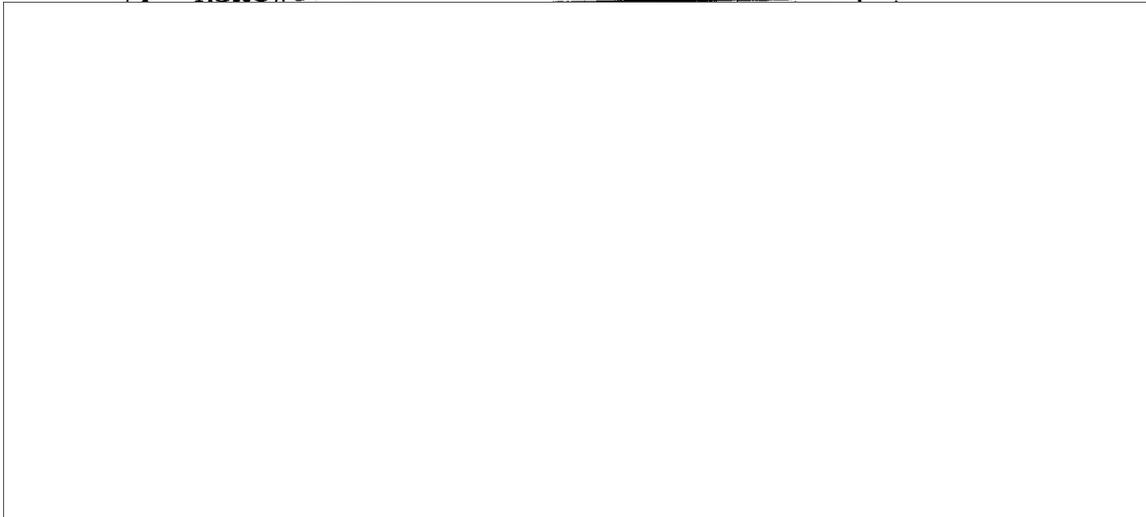
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4. Renewed Infiltration and Redeployments:

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5. [redacted] two regiments of the NVA 316th Division may have already deployed out of the country during 1968. One or both of these regiments could be in the DMZ area. There is some evidence from POWs, moreover, that elements of the North Vietnamese 308th Division have been in the DMZ/Quang Tri Province area for some time.

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6. At present, the Communists are known to have at least 18 regiments, under four division headquarters and one senior front command, arrayed

[redacted] Thus it seems probable that additional enemy forces are present whose exact identity is still unknown. About half of the forces in Quang Tri are concentrated in the western half of the province; strong elements of the other half, however, have been repositioning southeastward over the past few weeks for what will probably become one of the major enemy offensive movements of the war.

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7. The 324B Division has slipped down from the DMZ along the foothills and joined several independent NVA regiments operating out of the mountainous base area (called Base Area 101) and the open country south of Dong Ha and north of My Chanh. These forces now pose a major threat to the urban centers in the area. The continued use of north-south Route 1 and the Cua Viet River, as allied supply links to the DMZ, is also threatened by these enemy deployments.

8. It seems unlikely that the Communists would move DMZ forces as far south into eastern Quang Tri if they were not fairly confident of their ability to maintain relatively secure supply links from the DMZ area to these units. It is possible that some of the missing elements of the 316th Division are now filling in along the eastern DMZ in order to plug the hole left by the southward shift of the 324B Division.

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It also appears that some elements of the 320th Division which shifted eastward are intended to help cover the area around Con Thien.

9. New Logistic Patterns: The Communists may also intend their recent logistic activity in the A Shau valley area to play a supporting role in the stepped-up NVA operations in eastern Quang Tri. Photography late last month showed that about four miles of new road had been constructed eastward off Route 548, which runs through the A Shau valley. the Communists hope to link it up with the existing road to the lowlands and to the city of Hue which runs from the village of Ta Luong in central Thua Thien. Some US officials in the area believe the Communists are already moving supplies over the truckable portion of this road net,

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10. Photography shows in addition that the integration of the A Shau valley complex with other enemy facilities in northern South Vietnam involves the construction of landline telephone circuits along the Laos-GVN border from the DMZ to the A Shau area.

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11. The road building around A Shau has been accompanied by other enemy road improvement to the north which facilitates movement into the Khe Sanh sector and central Quang Tri. Aerial photography shows two new roads under construction from a point near Ban Dong on Route 9 toward the Khe Sanh area. The enemy has also been using Route 9, having driven a Lao military unit from its position at Ban Houei Sane in late January. Photography of early February showed that medium to heavy vehicular traffic had been moved over portions of Route 9 near the South Vietnam border.

12. Communist road construction has been paralleled by a sharp step-up in the movement of supplies into the southern DRV-DMZ area and down to the Lao panhandle road net. Although the exact level of this activity is not apparent, it appears to have been sufficient to build up at least a substantial reserve of war supplies throughout much of the DMZ

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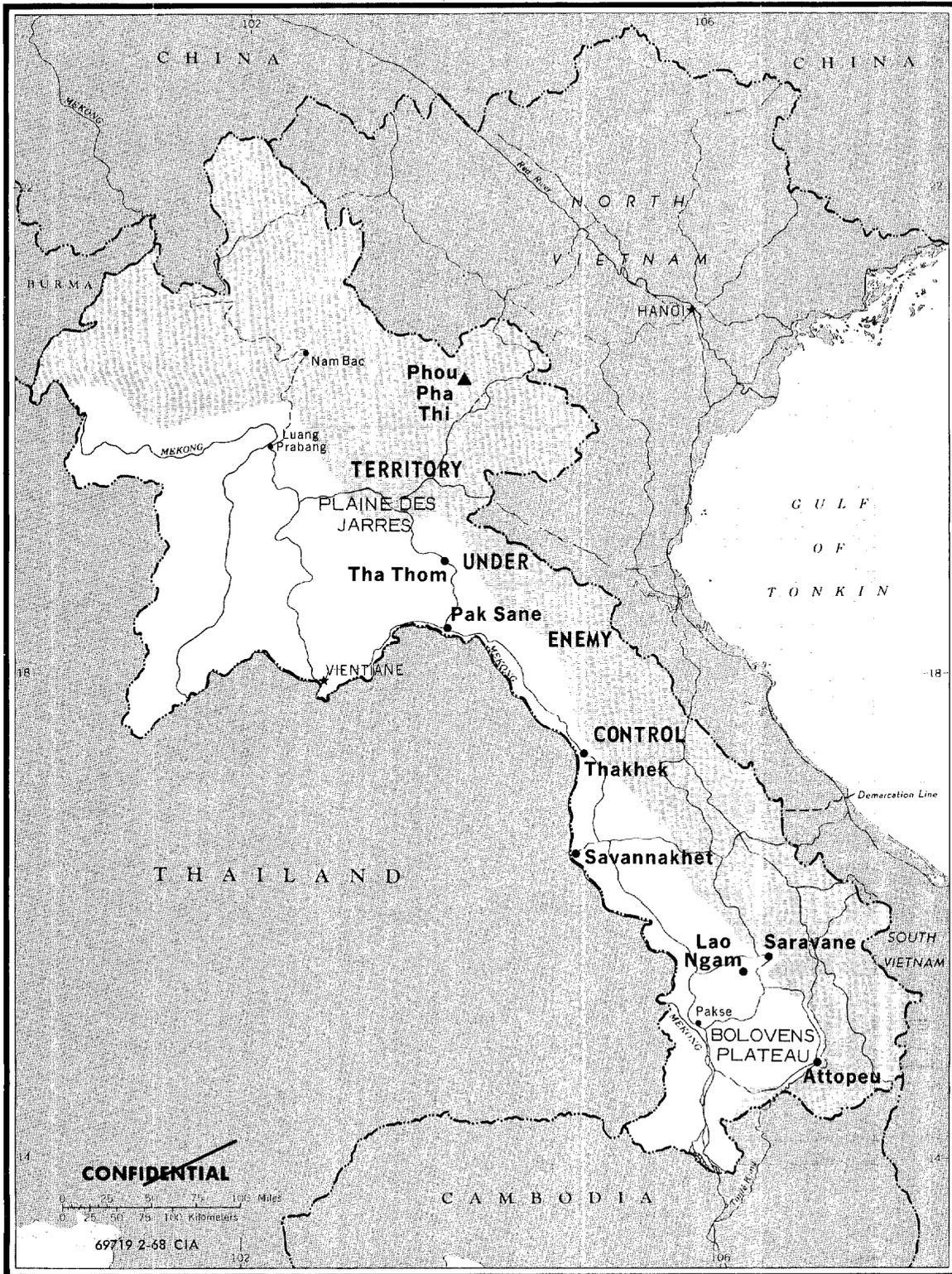
13. Expanded Ground Pressure in Laos: The Communists have also been maintaining an unusually high level of military pressure in Laos over the past several weeks. Much of this activity has been centered around the strategic Bolovens Plateau area in southern Laos. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops have surrounded and harassed the provincial capitals of Saravane and Attapeu and attacks have been mounted in recent days against the important government base camp at Lao Ngam and outlying positions along the southern rim of the Bolovens. The Communists have also been more active in the northern portion of the country, pushing government troops from advanced bases south of the Plaine des Jarres and occupying Tha Thon on 20 February. In addition, the Communists are closing in on Phou Pha Thi, a guerrilla base only 15 miles from the North Vietnamese border which has played an important role in guiding US air strikes against North Vietnam, and it appears increasingly doubtful that the base can be held in the face of a concerted thrust.

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14. We believe that the developments described above, together with the current pattern of major Communist military action--particularly the buildup and harassment of Khe Sanh and the tenacious enemy defense in Hue--point to the probability that the most concentrated enemy effort in South Vietnam over the near term will be focused on the two northern provinces. Action in this sector could be accompanied by continued military pressure of various types elsewhere in South Vietnam and possibly on a wider scale in Indochina. The following paragraphs describe some of the possibilities and our assessment of their likelihood.

15. A Second Front in Laos: It is conceivable that the North Vietnamese intend greatly to expand the fighting in Laos, possibly in combination with a new outbreak of insurgent activity in Thailand. They might hope to accomplish further thinning of US military resources in Vietnam by forcing the US to deploy troops into Laos or Thailand. Even if the US did not react with troops, Hanoi might hope that the threat created in Laos would confuse and cloud the war issue in Washington and possibly deter or delay the US from some additional commitments in Vietnam. The best of the evidence for such a Vietnamese plan is seen in the current pressure in southern Laos.

16. Hanoi doubtless would be pleased if its current effort in Laos had a deterrent effect on US commitments in Vietnam, but we doubt that this is the primary goal of the North Vietnamese action around the Bolovens, or that Hanoi is prepared at the present stage of the war to commit very many resources to a major military campaign in Laos. The Communists have not, for example, attempted to follow up on the panicky government retreat from the Nam Bac valley in northern Laos. We believe they are probably interested primarily in reestablishing their presence in the Se Done valley west of Saravane and, when they have stripped out the area's rice stocks to support their Vietnam-oriented buildup in the infiltration corridor and in northern South Vietnam, will probably relax their pressure on the town. It is entirely possible that the Laotians will have deserted Saravane by that time, however, and that the city will come at least temporarily under enemy control.

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17. In summary, we do not believe that Hanoi intends to greatly expand its military objectives in Laos over the next several months, nor do we see any signs of Vietnamese intent to expand hostilities there much beyond the normal level of dry-season fighting. There is a good chance, however, that the enemy will attempt--probably in orchestration with events in South Vietnam--to win a psychological victory by harassing government towns on the Mekong River or possibly even occupying one for a short period. The timing of such a move is of course difficult to predict, but our best guess is that the Communists will hold off until and unless the situation in South Vietnam reaches a climatic stage, when Hanoi might expect that a series of dramatic "victories" in Laos could have an additional and telling psychological impact on the overall allied positions in the war.

18. Current anti-government activity by insurgents in Thailand may be viewed in Hanoi as helpful in deterring fuller US or Thai commitments in Vietnam. There is little evidence, however, that sufficient Communist assets are presently in place there to pose much more than a continuing terrorist threat to Thai security forces or the US air bases, assuming that the insurgents were ordered into an all-out effort by Hanoi and/or Peking.

19. A Full Scale Invasion of South Vietnam: There is also the possibility that the military developments described earlier in this paper indicate that Hanoi has decided to throw its full military weight into the fray and launch an "all-out invasion" of South Vietnam, putting sufficient manpower into the effort to try to ensure that allied forces cannot block Communist occupation of at least the far northern provinces. Hanoi might be acting either from a belief that the allies were on the ropes in South Vietnam as a result of recent Communist military action, or that Vietnamese Communist resources are no longer sufficient to sustain a protracted war. In this case, Hanoi might have assurances from Peking that Chinese forces will be sent into the DRV to man the defenses left by the NVA as it moves south en masse.

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20. Evidence of recent NVA activity, however, does not suggest that any such plan is currently being implemented. [redacted]

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Although there is evidence that infiltration into the South is continuing, the pattern and pace so far are in line with "normal" NVA movements and are not suggestive of wholesale deployments. It does not appear, moreover, that the present scale of logistic support to the South is indicative of an all-out push. Rather, the level seems designed more to support sustained military operations by the forces now in place in the area.

21. Other evidence on the state of affairs within the DRV, including the regime's domestic propaganda pitch, [redacted]

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[redacted] and do not suggest that any all-out push is coming. In fact, regime propaganda in the wake of the Tet offensive is again stressing the protracted nature of the conflict as if to prepare the people for a long road of sacrifice ahead.

22. New Mass Urban Attacks: Another possibility is a new round of coordinated mass attacks on the urban areas of South Vietnam--similar in scale and magnitude to the Tet offensive. This might be kicked off simultaneously with a heavy offensive in the northern provinces--perhaps a major push against Khe Sanh and a thrust in the eastern coastal plains. The Communists may also reopen a major campaign in the highlands where they retain substantial uncommitted force, principally from the NVA 1st Division. [redacted]

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23. At the present time, however, we do not believe the evidence is indicative of a new urban offensive on anything like the scale of the Tet attacks. The Tet offensive, it is now clear, took long, careful planning and extensive logistic preparations. To repeat such an effort, particularly given the heavy losses in military manpower and covert resources which the Communists suffered, would, in our judgment, take a long time to prepare. Moreover, the important element of surprise is now lost to the Communists--probably for some time. Were they to throw in the bulk of their uncommitted forces, they could hardly expect now to accomplish much more with a new round of mass assaults than they did the first time. In view of their near total failure to enlist the active support of the populace in the first round, they may be preparing for an extensive propaganda effort among the people before kicking off a new mass effort at a "general uprising." Field reports, in fact, indicate that such a campaign may be getting under way.

24. It is clear, nonetheless, that even if a new mass wave of attacks is not in the offing, the Communists plan to keep up military/terrorist-type pressure on the cities much more extensively than before. A recently captured document giving an assessment of the Communist situation on 1 February, just after the opening of the Tet offensive, indicates clearly that the initial attacks were only the opening of a longer period of sustained Communist offensive operations. In the Saigon area, for example, the enemy may make a special effort, partly for political and psychological reasons, to harass and disrupt the life of the city. The current lull there could be covering enemy efforts to infiltrate a core of regular and guerrilla fighters for a new round of terrorist attacks. If the city's defenses began to falter, the substantial enemy main force elements still positioned near Saigon could be moved in to exploit the situation.

25. It would also appear from the present military dispositions of Communist forces that continuing, selective attacks on provincial capitals and lesser centers are highly likely. Some of these will probably be coordinated assaults along the lines

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of the 17-18 February assaults. In the countryside, reports indicate that the Communists are attempting to mix more readily with the people than they did during the past year, and that they are trying to enlist and arm the rural populace in some places, thus bolstering their guerrilla and militia capability. Attacks on the urban areas support Communist actions in the countryside, partly by drawing the allied forces out of the rural areas.

26. It is probable that this type of action, combined with major feints and probes at isolated allied military and civil facilities in the highlands and in concert with a very heavy push in the two northern provinces of South Vietnam, constitutes the most likely scope of enemy military strategy over the near term.

27. We believe that the coming weeks will also see a continuing increase in attacks by fire on allied airfields and other key installations. Assaults of this type have been rising steadily in number and intensity for over a year, as the Communists moved new arms into most areas of South Vietnam to help accomplish the mission. Such attacks tend to reduce friendly reaction capability and also force the concentration of more allied resources into static defense operations.

28. Even if their maximum objectives are frustrated, the Communists will endeavor to maintain enough control over rural areas and enough psychological, military and terrorist pressure on urban centers to erode popular confidence in the GVN's ability to govern and in the capacity of allied and GVN arms to provide basic physical security anywhere in South Vietnam. Through propaganda and political agitation, the Communists will also endeavor to focus popular resentment over the physical destruction of property and the plight of the dislocated against the GVN and its foreign allies, principally the US.

A Major Effort Probable in North South Vietnam

29. The developments described earlier in this paper strongly suggest that the Communists intend to inaugurate a major military push in the northern two provinces of South Vietnam. Major Communist



forces are, of course, in position around Khe Sanh, and a massive ground assault on the base could come at any time. We think it probable, however, that the heavy aerial bombing raids in the vicinity of the base and the continuous allied artillery fire into surrounding Communist positions will make it very difficult for the Communists, at least over the near term, to mount ground attacks of the extent necessary to overrun the site.

30 It is possible they will attempt a long "siege" effort, seeking by occasional infantry forays and strong attacks by fire, gradually to render the base untenable or at the least, to keep major allied forces tied down in defense of the base. On the other hand, there is evidence of continuing enemy preparations for a ground assault against the base, should the prospects for success appear promising.

31. In the course of the action, the Communists may even reduce their besieging units by deploying some of them into other areas of Quang Tri and Thua Thien for military operations. The move of the 90th Regiment of the 324B Division eastward toward the coast, after it had engaged in at least logistic support operations for the Khe Sanh build-up, may be an indicator of Communist plans, as is the shift eastward of 320th Division elements.

32. Whether or not the Communists make an all-out try at Khe Sanh, it appears that they plan to move into a stage more closely approximating conventional warfare against the allies throughout the northern two provinces during the coming months. Enemy air operations, the introduction of new weapons, the spreading of Communist units deep into the coastal sector, and the long-term logistic backup implied by the construction of roads and landline facilities in the area are all indicative of such an intent. They denote an intent to keep up sustained military operations--albeit possibly gradualistic in nature--over a long period in the area.

33. The pattern in the repositioning of enemy units throughout the northern two provinces suggests the Communists may be planning a slow, steady, creeping effort to make the allied position gradually less tenable. If the Communist 324B Division is successful in blocking Route 1, for example, elements from it and other NVA units, such as the 270th Independent Regiment, would be in a position gradually to besiege such allied strongpoints as Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Quang Tri city. In the meantime, strong ground

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probes and attacks by fire on these points are likely at any time. Action over the long term in this sector would be similar to that conducted by the enemy along Route 9 during the past few months. Because of enemy positioning, the road in the mountain sector is virtually impassable to all but the very strongest allied convoys; at present, it is not a dependable route for allied reinforcements and resupply.

34. Communist plans apparently also call for attempts to sustain and hopefully to increase military pressure around Hue in Thua Thien Province. This is strongly suggested by the road building activities and logistic operations being conducted eastward by the Communists from the A Shau Valley area.

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35. It would appear from the general pattern of the Communist buildup in Quang Tri and Thua Thien that they envisage the development of a situation in both provinces before the end of the summer wherein their military initiative and control of the populace will be strong enough to reduce the allied capability largely to static defense actions and cautious, limited search operations such as are now conducted against Communist units in the highlands of South Vietnam. From this formidable position, the Communists would have numerous options, depending on how things went for them politically and militarily in other areas of the country during the same period.

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36. The Thua Thien area is so far the only sector where the Communists have chosen to announce that a "provisional administration" has been formed. This is another indication of their intent to make a strenuous effort to bring the region under permanent administrative control.

37. They could use the area for staging farther south into Quang Nam and Quang Tin provinces, augmenting and building their forces there and then attempting to repeat the same strategy as in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. On the other hand, if things went against them elsewhere, they might attempt to get negotiations started, using their position in the northern two provinces as a lever to gain concessions during the talks.

38. The Communists probably hope that the major effort they are developing in the northern provinces will eventually cause additional diversion of allied units from areas farther south, particularly the Saigon and delta sectors. Such a diversion would assist in the current enemy effort to keep up heavier pressure in selected provinces. Even if no further allied diversion to the north occurs, the continuation over an extended period of enemy pressure by fire attacks and outright assaults on urban centers could lead to virtual Communist domination of large areas in the southern provinces if, in the course of the attacks, the government's administrative and military apparatus declines in effectiveness and the confidence of the populace in the government continues to drop.

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