

Office of the Secretary of Defense
Chief, RDD, ESD, WHS

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Ch IV

2 June 1969

(54)

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Vietnamizing the War (NSSM 36)

The Joint Chiefs of Staff have prepared an outline plan (enclosure 1) for Vietnamizing the War, with specific recommendations and alternatives for the remainder of 1969. This plan has been coordinated with the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency. As I shall indicate below, I believe we can plan tentatively to withdraw 50,000 men in 1969, with the first increment of 20,000-25,000 men to start redeployment in July. For reasons I shall outline, I believe we must keep our planning flexible and not commit now beyond the 20,000-25,000. The State Department believes the withdrawal package for 1969 should consist of 85,000 men (Alternative C below).

I indicated in my report following my trip to South Vietnam that I was disappointed in the progress made by the South Vietnamese in assuming more of the burden of the war. Nonetheless, they are improving and with the right kind of help from us, continuing improvement can be expected. There are a number of unknowns, however, affecting the rate and absolute level of improvement in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). These unknowns include, inter alia, the quality of leadership, the motivation of the armed forces, the psychological reaction of the South Vietnamese to US redeployments, and the ability of the South Vietnamese to find a stronger organizational structure. These unknowns, collectively, can be at least as important to the over-all situation in South Vietnam as the more tangible and measurable elements. With such unknowns, we must recognize the possibility that even with additional training, improved equipment, and increased combat support, the RVNAF will not be able soon to stand alone against the current North Vietnamese and Viet Cong force levels. Our timetable for withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam should take such conditions into account. We should strive for a sensitive balance between too much, too soon and too little, too late.

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I believe this is best done by making an early announcement of the withdrawal of a modest number of troops (20,000-25,000) and then carefully weighing the situation, to include various reactions (NVN, SVN, US), before making the next move. If this announcement is made in early June, withdrawal of this initial increment could begin in July and be completed in August.

The reaction to such a move could be favorable to us in several ways:

-- The North Vietnamese would be very hard pressed to counter it. Our military position would still be strong. Together with our allies, we would have high confidence of being able to put down an enemy offensive. Such a posture should produce a most desirable and widespread psychological impact.

-- The South Vietnamese would have further opportunity to understand that we are indeed serious about Vietnamizing the war. At the same time, they would not be likely to feel that we were rejecting our commitment. A successful defense against an enemy offensive could help to condition them for succeeding incremental withdrawals.

-- Those Americans who have been most vocal against the war probably would not be silenced by this action, but important elements of the US public would be encouraged.

If this assessment of initial reactions proves to be correct, you could then decide to withdraw a second increment later in the year. A decision in early August would permit redeployment to begin in September and, depending on size and composition, be completed in October or November. If conditions were favorable, a decision on a third increment could be made in October or November for additional withdrawals to begin before the end of the year and be completed in early 1970.

1969 Redeployments

There are several alternatives as to the over-all size and composition of the forces which might be withdrawn from South Vietnam this year. Five of the alternative packages that I consider feasible for implementation in 1969 are:

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1969 REDEPLOYMENT ALTERNATIVES - SVN a/
(Strength 000)

| | | <u>Element</u> | |
|------------------------------------|---|----------------|-----------------|
| <u>Alternative A</u> | | | |
| 50, 000 troops | 1 Marine Division, Aviation Units & Support | | 26. 8 |
| mainly combat | 1 Army Division and Support | | 19. 6 |
| 2 divisions | Air Force Elements | | 1. 3 |
| | Navy Elements | | 2. 3 |
| | | | 50. 0 |
| <u>Alternative B</u> | | | |
| 50, 000 troops | 1 Marine Division, Aviation Units & Support | | 26. 8 |
| 1 Div plus | Support Elements, All Services | | 23. 2 |
| support slice | | | |
| | | | 50. 0 |
| <u>Alternative B' b/</u> | | | |
| 50, 000 troops | Combat forces (2 Regiments/Brigades from | | |
| | 1 Corps and 2 Brigades from III/IV Corps) | | 22. 0 |
| 4 Rgmt/Brgd | Support Elements, All Services | | 28. 0 |
| plus support | | | |
| | | | 50. 0 |
| <u>Alternative C (Revised)</u> | | | |
| 85, 000 troops | 1 Marine Division | | 22. 5 |
| 2 Divisions | 1 US Army Division | | 18. 7 |
| plus support | Division Support Trains | | 25. 0 <u>c/</u> |
| | 1 Marine Air Group | | 1. 5 |
| | Hq & Logistics & Other Support Forces | | |
| | not Associated with Divisional Support | | 17. 3 |
| | | | 85. 0 |
| <u>Alternative D</u> | | | |
| 100, 000 troops | 1 Marine Division, Aviation Units & Support | | 27. 7 |
| 2 Divisions | 1 Army Division and Support | | 19. 6 <u>c/</u> |
| and Support | Support Elements, All Services | | 52. 7 |
| | | | 100. 0 |

a/ Alternatives A, B and D correspond to those in the JCS plan. Alternative C (3-1/3 Division) of the JCS plan is not recommended; a revised C has been substituted. Within each alternative the actual mix of units may vary somewhat in final implementation.

b/ Alternative B' is in Appendix C of the JCS plan.

c/ Support spaces have been removed from each Army support slice to provide support to RVNAF.

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The South Vietnamese are prepared for A, B, or B'. Alternative C (Revised) probably would be acceptable if adequately explained, although both it and D exceed their expectations in terms of quantitative reductions in US strength this year.

In the United States, Alternative D, closely followed by C (Revised) probably would best mitigate pressures to curtail our involvement in the war. Alternatives A, B, or B' are probably about what the US public expect. It should be recognized that an enemy offensive which caused heavy American casualties during implementation of any alternative -- particularly C or D -- could result in seriously adverse public reaction.

Alternatives B, B', C (Revised) and D withdraw mixed packages of combat and support personnel. The JCS consider the support units should remain in Vietnam to support RVNAF and the subsequent withdrawal of additional US forces. However, in these more balanced packages, the support forces to be withdrawn will be carefully selected from among those which will have minimum impact on RVNAF effectiveness.

Longer Term Plans

The outline plan of enclosure 1 considers tentative timetables to Vietnamize the War during the period 1970-1972. They redeploy US forces over alternative periods of time and leave residual American troops in South Vietnam ranging from 260,000 to 306,000. Although it appears feasible mechanically to withdraw up to 290,000 US forces from South Vietnam by the end of 1972, even this 42 month timetable would probably result in an interruption in pacification progress. The interruption might range from only temporary reductions to a long-term degradation. To withdraw much faster (such as by the end of 1970), in the absence of some North Vietnamese withdrawals, could result in serious setbacks to the pacification program, a significant decline in allied military capability, and the possibility of a SVN collapse.

Recommendations

I believe we should stay as flexible as possible in our planning. I do not believe it is advisable to adopt a firm plan now to redeploy beyond the first increment of 20,000-25,000. Rather, I believe we should take the initial step, assess the situation fully, and then

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decide on the size and timing of the next step. In the meantime, and in concert with other agencies of the government, we will exert a major effort to expand, train, and modernize the RVNAF, and do whatever else may be required to transfer progressively to the South Vietnamese greatly increased responsibility for all aspects of the war. In summary:

-- A first increment of about 20,000 to 25,000 troops should be withdrawn, starting in July 1969.

-- The composition of the first increment should be determined by the JCS in coordination with CINCPAC, MACV, the US Mission, and the GVN.

-- The size, composition, and timing of a second increment in 1969 should be based on a careful evaluation of the reaction to the withdrawal of the first increment.

-- Current planning should be based on not more than 50,000 troops being withdrawn in 1969, as recommended by the JCS, unless an early agreement is reached with North Vietnam on mutual withdrawals.

-- Planning should stay as flexible as possible, so that rapid and appropriate additional responses can be made to further RVNAF improvement, the negotiations situation in Paris, and the military situation in Southeast Asia.



Enclosures

1. JCS initial report on Vietnamizing the war
2. Views of SecState

NOTE: The Plan attached to this memorandum is the same as that attached to JCS Memo for SecDef of 31 May, "Vietnamizing the War," SecDef Contr Nr X-2924, except that the OSD views footnoted in the latter have been incorporated into the text or dropped. The Plan is therefore again not reproduced.

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