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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

Ch. VII
26 JAN 1972

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR NATIONAL SECURITY
AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: The Current Situation in SVN (U)

The recent message from General Abrams, which summarized the situation in Vietnam as he sees it, and recent intelligence assessments indicate that the North Vietnamese are preparing for major offensive action. The southward movement of division-size NVA main force units from North Vietnam, together with rehabilitation and training activities since LAM SON 719, reflect enemy willingness to escalate the protracted war to large unit fighting in selected areas.

The northern half of the country appears to be the primary area of activity for the anticipated increase in main force activity, particularly the highlands of MR 2 and northern MR 1. In the south and the coastal portions of MRs 1 and 2, increased activity on a smaller scale concurrent with these main force attacks can be expected.

There is a growing consensus among intelligence analysts that the main enemy thrust will be made in the Kontum area, the scene of similar enemy offensives in the past. The key issue here is whether or not the enemy will attack with the 320th NVA Division, which is enroute from NVN. Employment of the 320th in the battle would give the enemy about a 1 1/2 to 1 force advantage in the area, his best there in recent years, but not as high as his 2 or 3 to 1 advantage achieved over RVNAF during LAM SON 719. On the other hand, if the 320th is used as a reserve to protect the enemy LOC in south Laos, the force ratio would be about the same as in last year's Fire Support Base 6 attacks (1 1/2 to 1 in favor of RVNAF). Enemy strategy seems to be designed to tie down RVN forces by diversionary main force attacks in Pleiku and northern MR 1 and a sharp surge of attacks by fire and harassment elsewhere in the country. The pattern of fighting in the Central Highlands and MR 1 appears to be shaping up in a manner similar to that of previous years, although with stronger forces available to both sides.

The North Vietnamese have significantly increased the threat to our air operations. Additional SAM battalions have been moved into the panhandle area of North Vietnam as well as into Laos. Last year SAM battalions in the vicinity of the DMZ fired on U.S. aircraft flying over the RVN and there is no reason to believe such firings will not occur again. There also has been a notable increase in the amount of

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antiaircraft artillery, both in the southern portions of North Vietnam and the adjacent areas of Laos. The unprecedented number of MIG forays into Laos, and their willingness to challenge our aircraft further, add to the significance of the mounting threat to our aircraft.

Neither SAMs nor MIGs have had a major effect on our air losses. Six US aircraft were lost to SAMs and one to a MIG in 1971; no losses to MIGs or SAMs have occurred thus far in 1972. Nevertheless, giving unhampered freedom of action to the North Vietnamese air defenses poses a danger to the lives of our airmen. Additionally, it forces our commanders to deploy aircraft for defensive purposes which could be used directly against the enemy's units on the ground. When the expected heavy combat occurs, General Abrams wants to be able to deal effectively with the enemy air defense in order to free all of his air power to blunt the enemy offensive.

I have examined the developing situation in the Republic of Vietnam as it pertains to General Abrams' request for a standby operating authorities. To assist him in preparing for ground action in MRs 1 and 2, I have authorized emplacement of sensors by air throughout the DMZ to the extent required to provide intelligence for the safety of friendly forces. I also have granted authority for fixed and rotary wing aircraft, logistic troop lift and medical support of RVNAF cross-border operations against enemy bases along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. General Abrams will keep me informed of such operations and the extent of US involvement. In response to General Abrams' request to strike logistics targets in NVN, I have asked for the development of contingency plans which could be authorized for execution by Washington if major enemy attacks make it necessary. Additionally, I have urged General Abrams to alert all friendly forces of the need for increased vigilance throughout Vietnam in the coming weeks.

In response to General Abrams' concern that the enemy will use MIGs, SAMs, and AAA to complicate allied operations during the impending campaign, I have advised COMUSMACV to consider hostile any MIGs which are airborne from Dong Hoi, Vinh and Quan Lang during the expected enemy ground offensive. These aircraft may be engaged when encountered below the 18th parallel. Also, commanders have adopted a more vigorous protective reaction posture as demonstrated by recent strikes against airfields at Quan Lang and Dong Hoi. These strikes were necessary to defend unarmed reconnaissance aircraft reconnoitering enemy airfield activity. In conjunction with the MIG threat, I have also advised General Abrams that he may employ antiradiation missiles against ground control intercept (GCI) radar sites outside of Route Package 6 (Hanoi-Haiphong area) when MIGs are airborne and demonstrate hostile intent. Tactics employed when these missiles are fired will insure that they do not impact in Route Package 6 or the Peoples Republic of China. In the event that existing authorities are not sufficient to prevent SAM interference with our air forces acting against the expected offensive, I have told General Abrams that consideration will be given to a one-time attack of those SAM facilities in NVN which constitute the most immediate threat.

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The general trend of the enemy's action this dry season was predicted last fall. Measures were taken to improve and increase ARVN strength in MRs 1 and 2. As you know, an armored cavalry unit has been added to the defense of MR 2 and an additional division has been formed in MR 1. Elements of the JGS General Reserve have been alerted for movement to MR 2. VNAF support for both areas has been strengthened. Despite these improvements in RVNAF, I continue to be concerned by the very low personnel strength of the fighting battalions.]-

In summary, the enemy is preparing to escalate the war in South Vietnam. No matter what we do, the enemy offensive cannot be prevented. However, the North Vietnamese will suffer heavy casualties. We are weakening his forces with the interdiction campaign and we will have adequate strength to blunt his offensive. The fundamental purpose of the enemy effort is to discredit Vietnamization in two ways. First, Hanoi wants to undermine domestic US support for the Administration's policy of firmness against NVN demands for abandoning South Vietnam. Second, the North Vietnamese want to create in South Vietnam a wave of demoralization which would undermine the success of the pacification effort and further erode the South Vietnamese peoples' willingness to fight. They expect US domestic support to deteriorate under the impact of heavier US casualties or escalatory actions on our part.

The guidance on expanded operating authorities which I have provided General Abrams, as well as the actions which he and the Vietnamese leaders have taken to strengthen MRs 1 and 2, will assist in successfully meeting the coming enemy offensive. I anticipate some setbacks of a magnitude which may generate unfavorable public responses here and in Vietnam -- for example, the temporary loss of a city such as Kontum. I do not believe that the North Vietnamese have it within their power to achieve decisive results in either a political or military sense. The true test of the coming campaign will be decided by the effect it has on the South Vietnamese willingness to fight for what is theirs.

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