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February 2, 1970

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MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: John H. Holdridge

SUBJECT: MACV Report on the Nature of the Communist Military  
Threat in the Vietnam Delta

At Tab B is MACV's response to your request of January 12 for an assessment of the Communist threat in the Mekong Delta which would make special reference to the RVNAF capacity to handle the increased enemy force. A cover memorandum to you from Secretary Laird is at Tab A, and Admiral McCain's comments on the MACV assessment is at Tab C.

The MACV Report begins by noting the arrival of five NVA regiments in the Delta and the enemy's apparent intention of establishing one or more division-level headquarters there. It points out that these new regiments have brought the number of Main Force Battalions in IV Corps up from 19 last May to 36 by the end of December, with a 67 percent increase in Main Force personnel. Local Force battalions have decreased due to attrition from 21 to 17, however, with a 41 percent drop in personnel strength.) Enemy activity in the Delta has picked up, and although Communist intentions for employment of the new regiments and their ultimate destinations is not yet clear, enemy dispositions suggest that the Communist purposes are to disrupt pacification, defeat Vietnamization, and possibly relieve ARVN pressure on VC Local Forces by diverting it into engagements with the new NVA regiments. With ARVN so engaged, the Local Forces might have increased opportunities for attacking GVN territorial forces guarding population centers.

The Report goes on to say that except for Chau Doc and Kien Giang provinces, security has not generally declined in the Delta and the impact of the new regiments on pacification and Vietnamization cannot yet be determined. The enemy would hope to be able to draw off ARVN units into remote areas and defeat them in detail, thus shaking public confidence in the GVN and

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E.O. 13526, Section 3.5  
Per Hr. 2/10/2017  
By [Signature] NARA, Date 3/31/2017  
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increasing pressures on the US for further troop redeployments. The Communists will be cautious and selective, though, to avoid being caught by US firepower, and to avoid defeats which could have the opposite effects on an ARVN defeat. This would fit into the "protracted war" strategy of COSVN Resolution 9. Limited ground and sapper attacks against selected Delta cities are anticipated prior to Tet, with larger-scale attacks later in the more remote areas of the Delta.

On the ARVN side, MACV states that the GVN "has reacted appropriately to the increased threat in the Delta". A Vietnamese Marine Brigade has been sent to reinforce the ARVN; the 9th ARVN Division has been operating effectively, having disrupted the activities of several VC Main Force and Local units, and can be used as a reaction force (e.g. in the Chau Doc area); an additional US air cavalry troop has been provided and B-52 raids and other US river patrol and intelligence operations continue. Friendly forces in the Delta have approximately a 3 to 1 strength ratio over enemy forces, 80 percent of this consists of RF/PF units.

Admiral McCain endorses the MACV Report, describes the enemy strategy of reinforcing the Delta as "horn of desperation and the threat of defeat" which nevertheless poses risks for us, and links ARVN's ability to withstand to our ability to cope with the "sudden large-scale infusion of logistic support from Cambodia". He also expresses concern about an enemy offensive in I Corps which would impair ARVN's ability to reinforce the Delta. The enemy's logistics surge in the Panhandle and impending offensive in Laos also disturb him, and he calls for air attacks against supply concentrations and weapons positions just inside North Vietnam.

Secretary Laird's cover memorandum takes exception to Admiral McCain's remarks concerning large-scale NVA/VC logistic support through Cambodia (with the inference that smaller-scale activity exists), the need to attack supply concentrations in the North, and the enemy's "desperation" strategy. Secretary Laird adds that the arrival of NVA units in the Delta contains negative aspects, such as their lack of familiarity with the terrain and decreased acceptability to the people. He concludes by warning that some tactical setbacks can be anticipated in the Delta which may be read by the press as indictments of Vietnamization, and that we will need to ride out these charges and take the steps necessary to keep the tactical setbacks from becoming strategic catastrophes.

Comment: The MACV Report is a balanced and dispassionate assessment which appears to make good sense. With Secretary Laird's footnotes, which are well-taken, it is a useful review of the situation in the Delta. At the risk of stepping on sacred ground, however, I believe that the MACV Report could have looked more deeply into one question: how the ARVN units now in the Delta stack up against the NVA/VC Main Force units which have been inserted. With the enemy's strength predominately Main Force, as opposed to the heavy concentration of GVN strength in RF/PF forces, we need to have some idea of the ARVN's capacity to slug it out. The 9th ARVN Division cited in the Report is rated only so-so; the 7th ARVN Division fair-to-poor (although its new commander may make a difference); the 21st ARVN Division is said to be good. Neither of the last two was mentioned. The capacity of the Marine Brigade was not described either. Unless I hear otherwise from you, I will ask General Blanchard, who handles Vietnam matters in ISA, if this additional element can be provided.

Atts.