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6. Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency¹

Washington, January 24, 1969.

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SUBJECT

The Situation in Vietnam: Overview and Outlook

[Omitted here is table of contents.]

SUMMARY

The present time is particularly appropriate for a review of the situation in Vietnam since we are at the close of a phase that began with the Tet Offensive last January. With the change in American administrations, the opening of the substantive negotiations in Paris and the current reintensification of the fighting after an appreciable lull, a new phase is now beginning.

Since Tet 1968, military trends have been increasingly favorable for allied forces. The Communists have taken staggering casualties, their combat effectiveness has declined, and their overall strength has [\[Page 13\]](#) been maintained only through huge inputs of North Vietnamese manpower. Hanoi recognizes its military shortcomings and has been seeking for several months to redress them. Many of the units withdrawn from combat last year are now returning after refitting and the level of infiltration has risen sharply since late November. The enemy has already begun to step up the level of his military action and we can expect more activity along the lines we have seen over the last few weeks. This may include at least terrorist and sapper attacks on major urban centers, including Saigon. Such attacks could come at anytime.

Politically, the Communists are engaged in a major effort to weaken the GVN and to create the appearance if not the substance, of an ongoing administrative apparatus “governing” as much of South Vietnam as possible. Their aim is to boost the prestige and image of the National Liberation Front and its claims of control over territory and people. These claims are wildly exaggerated. At the moment, the GVN’s position is a strong one: the political surface in South Vietnam is reasonably calm, progress is being made toward the elusive goal of stability, and the pace and effectiveness of pacification has increased appreciably in the past

few months. Events of the next few months, however, are certain to test South Vietnam's internal stability, the solidity of recent pacification gains, and particularly the GVN's ability to withstand the war of nerves the Communists patently intend to wage in Paris.

In the negotiations, the Communists have already proved to be tough and skillful bargainers. They obviously want to move into substantive issues, which they hope will prove explosive in Saigon and divisive in relations between the GVN and the United States. We believe, however, that they also view the Paris talks as a serious effort to explore the possibilities of a negotiated settlement.

We cannot predict the terms the Communists would eventually accept as a compromise settlement. Hanoi's minimum position, however, probably will include total American troop withdrawal in a clearly defined period, and a restructuring of the political order in South Vietnam which guarantees the Communists a role and a power base from which they can work to achieve their ultimate objective of domination.

Over the next few months the Communists will attempt to combine political action and military efforts in a mix that will enable Hanoi to cope with whatever policies are adopted by the new US administration. At the moment the Communists believe the war can be continued at acceptable costs long enough to convince the United States that a compromise political settlement is mandatory.

Over the near term, the critical variable in all major aspects of the Vietnamese struggle—decisions in Hanoi, negotiations in Paris, and the course of events in South Vietnam—will be the posture and policies of the new American administration.

[Omitted here are sections: I. "The Current Setting," II. "The Military Picture," III. "The Political Picture," IV. "Pacification," V. "The View From Hanoi," VI. "Communist Intentions: The Near Term" and VII. "Outlook" and three annexes entitled "The Vietnamese Protagonists," "Military Forces," and "Hanoi's Four Points and the Front's Five Points." [\[Page 14\]](#)

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1. Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 63, Vietnam Subject Files, 2 –C General Military Activity. Secret; Sensitive. Helms sent this memorandum to Kissinger under cover of a January 24 note in which he wrote: "Herewith are two copies of a study on Vietnam, which Bill Bundy requested some days ago. I wanted you to have these immediately since I think you will find this effort a useful updating of the situation. A copy has been sent to the Secretary of State." 