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SNIE 10-3-61
10 October 1961

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PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN SEATO
UNDERTAKINGS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

10 October 1961

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-3-61: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO
CERTAIN SEATO UNDERTAKINGS IN
SOUTH VIETNAM

THE PROBLEM

To estimate probable Communist reactions to the use
of SEATO forces in South Vietnam to prevent Communist in-
cursions or infiltration from North Vietnam.*

THE ASSUMPTION

For the purpose of this estimate it is assumed that in
response to an appeal from the Government of Vietnam (GVN),

* Other National Estimates pertinent to this problem are
SNIE 10-2-61, "Likelihood of Major Communist Military
Intervention in Mainland Southeast Asia," dated 27 June
1961; SNIE 58-2-61, "Probable Reactions to Certain Courses
of Action Concerning Laos," dated 5 July 1961;
NIE 14.3/53-61, "Prospects for North and South Vietnam,"
dated 15 August 1961; and SNIE 53-2-61, "Bloc Support of
the Communist Effort Against the Government of Vietnam,"
dated 5 October 1961.

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SEATO ground, naval, and air forces numbering about 25,000 are committed to patrol the GVN coast and to secure the GVN-Laotian border against incursions or infiltration from the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in North Vietnam. The SEATO objective, which will be publicly announced, is to stop external Communist assistance to the Viet Cong Communist guerrillas, while avoiding direct engagement by these troops in the conflict within South Vietnam.

THE ESTIMATE

1. We believe that the Communist Bloc would not commit North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist forces to a large-scale military attack against South Vietnam or Laos in response to the assumed SEATO action. The DRV would probably seek to avoid having its regular units enter into a direct military engagement with SEATO, and in particular

- 2 -

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US, forces. Hanoi, Peiping, and Moscow^{2/} would almost certainly be concerned over the increased risks for each of them of broadened hostilities involving US forces. Moreover, they are generally confident that their current low risk tactics of local subversion and supporting "national liberation" struggles will continue to be successful in Southeast Asia.

2. Nevertheless, Peiping and Hanoi in particular would be highly concerned as to the intentions of the SEATO forces, particularly during the initial deployment. The presence of SEATO forces so near its border would be a source of constant unease to the DRV. Moreover, both

2/ The Communist guerrilla organizations in both Laos and South Vietnam (the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong) are under the control of the Communist Party of North Vietnam and look to Hanoi for guidance and support. We believe that Hanoi exercises considerable local tactical latitude in conducting the Communist struggle in both countries. When the struggle is elevated to the international level, as is now the case with Laos, the major Bloc partners play an increasingly important leadership role. It is also likely that the USSR exercises considerable restraint on DRV or Chinese Communist decisions which would risk the broadening of hostilities and raise the issue of USSR or US participation.

- 3 -

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Hanoi and Peiping would consider it a particularly urgent matter to prevent any invigoration or strengthening of SEATO which could result from a successful SEATO operation. Both would seek by political means and by military means short of major overt attack, to frustrate the SEATO effort.

3. In the situation assumed, we believe that the DRV would seek at first to test the seriousness and effectiveness of the SEATO effort by subjecting the SEATO forces and their land lines of communication to harassment, ambush, and guerrilla attack. The Communists could not be expected to recognize the announced intention of the SEATO forces to avoid involvement in the internal struggle in South Vietnam. They would probably estimate that by using their Viet Cong apparatus in South Vietnam, by committing additional experienced guerrilla forces from North Vietnam^{3/} to operations

^{3/} Approximately 90,000 Vietnamese Communist troops, most of them from south and central Vietnam, were evacuated to North Vietnam in the regroupment of forces following the Indochina War. The DRV has maintained relatively intact a large part of this pool of manpower experienced in guerrilla operations in South Vietnam, drawing upon it for cadres to reinforce the Viet Cong.

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in territory long familiar to them, and by exploiting the opportunities offered by the sizable junk traffic in coastal waters, they could harass the SEATO land forces and infiltrate the SEATO blockade. The Communists would expect worthwhile political and psychological rewards if their harassment and guerrilla operations against SEATO forces were successful, including lowered GVN morale and increased tensions among some of the SEATO members. While seeking to test the SEATO forces, the DRV would not relax its Viet Cong campaign against the GVN.

4. It is expected that the SEATO action would cause the DRV to try to gain "compensation" in some manner, such as possibly declaring the 1954 Geneva Agreements, or certain articles of the Agreements, abrogated. It might also begin to receive increasing military assistance from the Soviet Union and Communist China openly and in unconcealed violation of the Agreements, and to buildup an air force which would include jets. The Bloc would attempt to encourage and instigate Laos and Cambodia to protest to the UN if any SEATO forces crossed the South Vietnam border.

- 5 -

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5. If no agreement on Laos had been reached at Geneva prior to the assumed SEATO action, we believe that the Communists would take steps to hasten their takeover of Laos. They would intensify their efforts to achieve political control, and they would step up military pressures against the Laotian Army. Communist strength in south Laos would probably be increased by forces from North Vietnam to guard against an effort to partition Laos or an attack against the Pathet Lao forces. The Soviet airlift would probably be increased with a heavier flow of military supply into south Laos, and the Communists would probably intensify their efforts to establish a secure route for motor traffic into the south. On the other hand, if the SEATO action took place after the establishment of a coalition government in Laos under Souvanna Phouma and the conclusion of an agreement at Geneva, the Communists would probably emphasize political rather than military measures to win control of the country. In either case, the scale of Communist infiltration of men and equipment from North to South Vietnam through Laos would probably not be significantly affected.

- 6 -

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6. If the SEATO action appeared to be proving effective in reducing the present scale of infiltration the Communists probably would increase their use of the mountain trail system through Cambodia. This is a longer and more difficult route but its use could keep at least minimum support flowing to the Viet Cong. At the same time, in order to reduce the apparent success of the SEATO action, they could intensify small unit attacks, assassinations, and local terrorism in South Vietnam; they could also commit more DRV irregular personnel for the harassment of the SEATO forces. It would probably be part of Communist tactics to play upon possible SEATO weariness over maintaining substantial forces and accepting losses in South Vietnam over a long period of time.

7. With the introduction of SEATO troops into South Vietnam, Communist China might increase its ground and air forces in South China and strengthen its military posture opposite Taiwan. It might also announce various types of military assistance to the DRV "to meet the imperialist threat" from South Vietnam, possibly including the

- 7 -

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stationing of Chinese Communist air units in North Vietnam. Nevertheless, we do not believe Peiping would consider assignment of SEATO forces to South Vietnam as an immediate and direct threat to its own national security.

8. At the same time, the Communist powers would immediately launch a major propaganda and political campaign designed to label the SEATO action as aggression, as a threat to the peace in the Far East, and as a disguised US effort to re-establish colonial rule over Indochina. To increase the fears of war in the Far East, Hanoi and Peiping would charge that the US, through SEATO, was preparing to attack the DRV and Communist China. The USSR would probably remind the world of its defense commitments to both Peiping and Hanoi.

9. The reaction to the assumed SEATO action among concerned non-Communist governments would vary widely. The Asian members of SEATO would find renewed confidence in the organization and the US, if the plan were to go well. If, on the other hand, the SEATO action were to become costly, prolonged, or to involve heavy casualties, the Asian members would soon become disenchanted and look to the US to do

- 8 -

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something to lessen the burden and to solve the problem. Australia would probably go along with this action; New Zealand might also join in. The UK would be likely to oppose the assumed SEATO action, and British reluctance to participate could be overcome only with great difficulty. France would also oppose the action and almost certainly would refuse to participate.

10. The neutralist governments in the area would be most concerned at the increased tension and danger of general hostilities. They would denounce the SEATO action and call for a peaceful solution. None of them, however, would be without some secret sympathy for the SEATO action for they all have fears of Communist subversion and expansion. For example, Sihanouk has become increasingly fearful of and disillusioned with the DRV's subversive and guerrilla organizations in Laos and South Vietnam, both of whom have violated Cambodia's borders. He has no desire to see Laos or South Vietnam under Communist domination. Despite his genuine and justifiable fear of Communist China and North Vietnam, Sihanouk might cooperate, covertly, with the SEATO action.

- 9 -

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11. Moscow and Peiping would bring strong pressures against Japan. Although the Japanese Government would be under strong leftist internal pressure, it would probably tolerate US logistic activities and would not officially oppose the SEATO effort. Nationalist China would be elated with the SEATO action.

- 10 -

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