

USAF PLANS AND POLICIES
IN
SOUTH VIETNAM AND LAOS
1964

USAF HISTORICAL DIVISION
LIAISON OFFICE

LAO: 

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FOREWORD

This study emphasizes Headquarters USAF's plans and policies with respect to South Vietnam and Laos in 1964. In the first four chapters the author describes the progressive military and political decline of the Saigon regime, after two government coups, and the efforts by U.S. authorities to cope with this problem. He notes especially the view of the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, frequently stated, that only air strikes on North Vietnam could end the insurgencies in South Vietnam and in Laos and bring stability to the Vietnamese government. This contrasted with administration efforts to devise an effective pacification program and, pending emergence of a stable government, its decision to adopt a "low risk" policy to avoid military escalation.

In the remaining chapters of the study, the author discusses briefly the major USAF augmentations, the expansion of the Vietnamese Air Force, the problem of service representation in Headquarters, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and the rules of engagement as they affected particularly air combat training. The study concludes with a brief review of the beginning of USAF special air warfare training for the Royal Laotian Air Force and the inauguration of limited USAF and Navy air operations over Laos to contain Communist expansion in that country.

USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam and Laos in 1964 is a sequel to three earlier studies prepared by the USAF Historical Division Liaison Office on counterinsurgency and Air Force activities in Southeast Asia. The earlier studies are: USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam, 1961-1963; USAF Counterinsurgency Doctrines and Capabilities, 1961-1962; and USAF Special Air Warfare Doctrine and Capabilities, 1963.


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I. REVISED U.S.-SOUTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY PLANNING

(TS) At the beginning of 1964 the South Vietnamese government, now headed by Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, had not recovered from the overthrow of former President Ngo Dien Diem on 1 November 1963. The breakdown in authority enabled the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) to overrun many strategic hamlets and military outposts and achieve other successes. Buoyed by victories, improved organization, and increasing North Vietnamese and other Communist bloc aid, their momentum continued into the new year. U.S. estimates placed hard-core Viet Cong strength at 22,000 to 25,000, and irregular forces at 60,000 to 80,000. Compared with January 1963 estimates, hard-core cadres had increased modestly and irregular forces had declined slightly despite losses of about 1,000 monthly from deaths, wounds, capture, and defec-¹tions.

(S) Despite setbacks, South Vietnamese forces engaged the Viet Cong in scores of actions, mostly in the southern part of the country. In the first five weeks of 1964 they averaged 56 battalion-size or larger operations per week, but smaller actions, while less frequent, were more effective, accounting for one half of reported enemy killed. Ground action was accompanied by a rising level of air support by USAF's 1st Air Commando Squadron (previously Farmgate) and the

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Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). Summarizing the military situation for the JCS, Adm. Harry D. Felt, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) and Gen. Paul D. Harkins, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMAC/V) said that the most suitable Vietnamese tactics required good intelligence, communication security, and large and small actions to "clear and hold" former enemy territory.²

(TS) After the fall of Diem, top U.S. military and diplomatic officials reviewed their Vietnam planning. Headquarters MAC/V prepared a new pacification plan to replace the poorly executed and moribund national campaign plan of 1963. The U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, advocated a broader civic action program as he perceived a Viet Cong shift from military to political tactics. Lodge stressed the need for trained political teams to acquaint the rural populace with the Saigon government's objectives in education, land reform, health, and other areas. He urged a beginning in Long An Province where Viet Cong control was virtually complete.³

(TS) The JCS pressed for stronger measures. On 22 January it recommended to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara that the United States should deploy more forces, assume temporary tactical control of the war, and make MAC/V responsible for the entire U.S. effort in South Vietnam. It favored air and ground actions to halt the flow of personnel and supplies from Laos and Cambodia, and air and sea strikes against North Vietnam.⁴

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(TS) McNamara expressed special interest in employing more reconnaissance to detect Communist infiltration. In response to a query, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, USAF Chief of Staff, prepared a list of Air Force and VNAF aircraft in the theater available for this purpose and said that more were scheduled to arrive. One decision reached was to begin high altitude U-2 flights in February over North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.⁵

General Khanh's Coup

(U) Meanwhile, a power struggle within the Minh government led, on 6 January 1964, to the establishment of a military triumvirate. Twenty-four days later Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, Commander of the Vietnamese Army's I Corps, organized a bloodless coup d'etat against the triumvirate. Khanh emerged as Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council and, on 8 February, took over as Premier of the country with General Minh elected to the ceremonial post of head of state. In justifying his actions, Khanh charged that the three-month old Minh regime had failed to make progress in effecting political, social, and economic reforms and was susceptible to the influence of a neutralist officer faction. He also accused President Charles De Gaulle, of France, of attempting to interfere in Vietnamese affairs.⁶

(S) In his coup, Khanh enjoyed the strong support of Col. Nguyen Cao Ky,* Commander of the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) since 16 December 1963. U.S. officials subsequently expressed hope that the new government

* On 5 March 1964 Colonel Ky was promoted to Brigadier General.

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would, as it promised, step up operations against the Viet Cong. On 17 February McNamara told a House committee that the Khanh government appeared to have considerably more popular support than its predecessor and was pursuing more effective strategic hamlet and "clear and hold" programs. The Defense Secretary reaffirmed plans to withdraw most U.S. troops by the end of 1965.⁷

(TS) To improve U.S. assistance to the new government, President Johnson established an interdepartmental committee* to manage U.S. policy and operations in South Vietnam, ordered the prompt fulfillment of all aid requests from Ambassador Lodge, asked that U.S. dependents be encouraged to return voluntarily, and directed a speed-up in shaping a "credible deterrent" against North Vietnam. The President also announced that McNamara would again visit Saigon to review the military situation there.⁸

Plans to Revitalize Counterinsurgency Operations

(S) As a result of Premier Khanh's promising leadership, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, asked the JCS for a new plan to revitalize counterinsurgency and recommendations to stabilize the government and prevent new coups.⁹

(TS) The JCS quickly recommended stepped up intelligence and operations in border areas, financial relief for areas taxed by both the government and the Viet Cong, more U.S. military and civilian

* Known as the Sullivan Committee, it was headed by William H. Sullivan, Assistant to Undersecretary for Political Affairs, W. Averill Harriman.

advisors at all government levels, better civilian programs to gain popular support, more effective crop destruction in Viet Cong areas, and increased effort to win the support of U.S. news media. It studied the possibility of combining the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG/V) with MAC/V,* endorsed the latest Vietnamese national pacification plan, and urged the preparation of a civilian plan wherein new "Life Hamlets" would replace strategic hamlets. The JCS cautioned that only Vietnamese civilian administrators, in the long run, could stabilize an area cleared by military forces.¹⁰

(S) The new national pacification plan was scheduled to begin on 3 February but the Khanh coup caused a delay. After he approved it on the 17th, government ministers changed the name to the Chien Thang or "victory" national pacification plan. Based on a "spreading oil drop" concept, it consisted of two phases. First, military operations would destroy or expel the Viet Cong. Secondly, the Viet Cong "infrastructure" or cells would be liquidated and replaced by new and "friendly" organizations. There would be expanded civic action programs designed to improve police, education, health, welfare, economic, and other activities to win the confidence of the people. A national pacification council, headed by Premier Khanh, was created to oversee the plan.¹¹

(S) An air plan subsequently prepared by the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) to aid pacification called for enlarged and better coordinated close support and interdiction programs with more aircraft placed on continuous alert to provide faster reaction. As the "oil drop" spread and liberated areas widened, pockets of Viet Cong would be rooted out by heavier day and night

* See p 16.

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and General Taylor to Saigon. Premier Khanh confessed he was unable to cope with the political problems. About 8,000,000 Vietnamese, he thought, were under Saigon's control but 6,000,000 were not, although all of the latter were not necessarily under the Viet Cong. But the Communists had the initiative as demonstrated by the loss of 200 of 2,500 villages since September 1963, the rise of "incidents" to 1,800 per month, and fewer casualties. Vietnamese forces, in turn, were suffering greater losses in casualties, weapons, and from desertions. Their morale was low and recruiting was difficult.⁶

More U.S. Aid and Reorganization of MAC/V

(TS) After his conferences, McNamara announced plans to enlarge the Vietnamese regular and paramilitary forces and provide other aid. The VNAF would receive more aircraft and a 100-percent increase in pilots. Observing the frequent changes in Vietnamese government and military leaders, the Defense Secretary conceded it would be a "long war," thus finally abandoning hope for withdrawing most U.S. forces by the end of 1965. On 19 May, President Johnson asked for and Congress shortly approved \$125 million to finance the additional military and economic aid.⁷

(S) In implementing actions, Harkins and Felt recommended and the JCS in late May approved the dispatch of more howitzers, grenade launchers, radar, and other equipment. To support the Chien Thang pacification plan, it agreed not only to retain all U.S. Army helicopters but to add one more Army helicopter unit. It also agreed on

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