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Notes on National Security Council Meeting
15 November 1961

Mr. Dulles opened the meeting with the reading and discussion of a prepared report on the Soviet-Chinese rift. Following the presentation the President asked for the basis of the current impasse between Russia and Albania. Mr. Dulles replied that it was obviously ideological since Albania was one of the smallest countries in Europe with the lowest per capita income and possibilities and potential in general. Mr. Amory then discussed the current food and agricultural shortages in Communist China and brought out the fact that Chinese advances have been generally retarded across the board because of crop shortages. The deficient diet has tended to diminish efficiency in other fields of endeavor. Production generally is on the decline. A brief outline of the size and disposition of Chinese armed forces was given. The President then asked what routes of movement are available for these troops from China to North Viet Nam. Mr. Amory pointed out and described the condition of railway and roads of access and cited the generally inadequate aspects of these avenues. Mr. Dulles cautioned that it should not be assumed that the Chinese setbacks as well as the ideological rift were such that the Soviets and Chinese would not be able nor willing to engage jointly any nation which threatened Communist interests.

Mr. Rusk explained the Draft of Memorandum on South Viet Nam. He added the hope that, in spite of the magnitude of the proposal, any U. S. actions would not be hampered by lack of funds nor failure to pursue the program vigorously. The President expressed the fear of becoming involved simultaneously on two fronts on opposite sides of the world. He questioned the wisdom of involvement in Viet Nam since the basis thereof is not completely clear. By comparison he noted that Korea was a case of clear aggression which was opposed by the United States and other members of the U. N. The conflict in Viet Nam is more obscure and less flagrant. The President then expressed his strong feeling that in such a situation the United States needs even more the support of allies in such an endeavor as Viet Nam in order to avoid sharp domestic partisan criticism as well as strong objections from other nations of the world. The President said that he could even make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success. The President repeated his apprehension concerning support, adding that none could be expected from the French, and Mr. Rusk interrupted to say that the British were tending more and more to take the French point of view. The President compared the obscurity of the issues

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in Viet Nam to the clarity of the positions in Berlin, the contrast of which could even make leading Democrats wary of proposed activities in the Far East.

Mr. Rusk suggested that firmness in Viet Nam in the manner and form of that in Berlin might achieve desired results in Viet Nam without resort to combat. The President disagreed with the suggestion on the basis that the issue was clearly defined in Berlin and opposing forces identified whereas in Viet Nam the issue is vague and action is by guerrillas, sometimes in a phantom-like fashion. Mr. McNamara expressed an opinion that action would become clear if U.S. forces were involved since this power would be applied against sources of Viet Cong power including those in North Viet Nam. The President observed that it was not clear to him just where these U.S. forces would base their operations other than from aircraft carriers which seemed to him to be quite vulnerable. General Lemnitzer confirmed that carriers would be involved to a considerable degree and stated that Taiwan and the Philippines would also become principal bases of action.

With regard to sources of power in North Viet Nam, Mr. Rusk cited Hanoi as the most important center in North Viet Nam and it would be hit. However, he considered it more a political target than a military one and under these circumstances such an attack would "raise serious questions." He expressed the hope that any plan of action in North Viet Nam would strike first of all any Viet Cong airlift into South Viet Nam in order to avoid the establishment of a procedure of supply similar to that which the Soviets have conducted for so long with impunity in Laos.

Mr. Bundy raised the question as to whether or not U.S. action in Viet Nam would not render the Laotian settlement more difficult. Mr. Rusk said that it would to a certain degree but qualified his statement with the caveat that the difficulties could be controlled somewhat by the manner in which actions in Viet Nam are initiated.

The President returned the discussion to the point of what will be done next in Viet Nam rather than whether or not the U.S. would become involved.

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The President asked what nations would possibly support the U.S. intervention in Viet Nam, listing Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand (?). Mr. Rusk replied that they all would but the President implied doubts because of the pitfalls of the particular type of war in Viet Nam. He described it as being more a political issue, of different magnitude and (again) less defined than the Korean War.

Mr. Fowler said that the studies suggested to him that the job to be done has been magnified, thereby leading to pessimistic conclusions as to outcome. Taylor responded that although the discussion and even some of the draft memoranda were somewhat pessimistic, he returned from Viet Nam with optimism over what could be done if certain clear-cut actions were taken. He envisioned two phases: (1) the revival of Viet Nam morale, and (2) the initiation of the guerrilla suppression program. Mr. McNamara cautioned that the program was in fact complex and that in all probability U.S. troops, planes and resources would have to be supplied in additional quantities at a later date.

The President asked the Secretary of Defense if he would take action if SEATO did not exist and McNamara replied in the affirmative. The President asked for justification and Lemnitzer replied that the world would be divided in the area of Southeast Asia on the sea, in the air and in communications. He said that Communist conquest would deal a severe blow to freedom and extend Communism to a great portion of the world. The President asked how he could justify the proposed courses of action in Viet Nam while at the same time ignoring Cuba. General Lemnitzer hastened to add that the JCS feel that even at this point the United States should go into Cuba.

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Page 3 of 4

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The President stated the time had come for neutral nations as well as others to be in support of U.S. policy publicly. He felt that we should aggressively determine which nations are in support of U.S. policy and that these nations should identify themselves. The President again expressed apprehension on support of the proposed action by the Congress as well as by the American people. He felt that the next two or three weeks should be utilized in making the determination as to whether or not the proposed program for Viet Nam could be supported. His impression was that even the Democratic side of Congress was not fully convinced. The President stated that he would like to have the Vice President's views in this regard and at that point asked if there was information on the Vice President's arrival. The President then stated that no action would be taken during the meeting on the proposed memorandum and that he would discuss these subjects with the Vice President. He asked State to report to him when the directed studies had been completed.

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