(a) Compare and contrast the evidence provided in Sources A and B about the strength of the South Vietnamese regime in the early 1960s.

Both sources concur that the local South Vietnamese regime was weak on its own due to domestic unpopularity and resistance. In Source A, Diem's position is described as "difficult" — he was "without popular support" and faced a "struggle" from the Vietnamese communists in his south. Not only does the presence of local insurgencies already evince the weakness of Diem's regime, but the communists were also sanguine about their prospects: they believed "the conditions were ripe for reunification", which entails a complete overthrowing of the South Vietnamese government. Hence, Diem's rule is presented as a weak and precarious one. Source B tells a similar story: Diem is unflatteringly called a "lackey" of the US, presented as a weak, puppet regime that lacked true autonomy and required foreign backing to survive. Additionally, the South Vietnamese people have "unite[d]" to "wage a resolute struggle" against the government, with widespread domestic resistance similarly revealing the weakness of Diem's grip on power. In this light, both sources offer a unified portrayal of the South Vietnamese regime as weak and unpopular.

This similar presentation is unsurprising given that both sources discuss the twilight years of Diem's regime — Source A focuses on 1962 and Source B on 1963, both years where the popular resistance towards Diem was obvious to all. In 1962, Diem introduced his Strategic Hamlet Programme that forcibly resettled reluctant populations into American compounds, drawing much public ire. Additionally, he narrowly survived an assassination attempt when the Independence Palace was bombed by two dissident pilots, highlighting his immense unpopularity. It is this backdrop of evident domestic discontent in 1962 that informs the assessment of Diem as weak in Source A. In 1963, popular opposition towards the Catholic Diem intensified after he banned the flying of the Buddhist flag on Vesak Day, incensing the majority Buddhist population. Subsequently, the shooting of nine unarmed protesters sparked a series of mass demonstrations and the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc. Thus, Mao's statement — created in the thick of the Buddhist crisis and at the regime's weakest point — similarly reflects that Diem's regime was fragile in the face of massive local resistance.

However, the sources diverge in their presentation of the extent to which American support was able to bolster the strength of the South Vietnamese regime. Source A suggests that American military support significantly strengthened Diem: even though the local regime was weak as previously discussed, the communists were so afraid of the "risk" of American

intervention that they “decided to fight cautiously” and urged “[the] exercise [of] restraint” to prevent “a war with a military enemy” By intimidating the communist insurgents, American military might successfully dampened resistance towards the South Vietnamese regime, strengthening its grip on power. In contrast, Source B presents American support as woefully insufficient to save the fatally weak Diem regime: even though the US “unleashed counter-revolutionary war”, the South Vietnamese people have “won major victories both politically and militarily” in their “struggle for liberation”, revealing that the South Vietnamese government was crumbling under the weight of popular opposition even with extensive American military support. In fact, Mao is “convinced” that the revolutionaries will “attain the goal” of reunification, his prediction of the US-backed Diem’s inevitable collapse evincing the inadequacy of American assistance. Hence, while Source A argues US support was a substantial source of strength for the South Vietnamese regime, Source B contends that US support was hardly enough.

The aforementioned difference in the time period — Source A’s 1962 and Source B’s 1963 — accounts for this difference in portrayal, as US support for Diem dwindled over time. In 1962, US support seemed more resolute: Kennedy had sent helicopters and green berets, authorised search-and-destroy operations, and sprayed Agent Orange as part of Operation Ranch Hand to aid the South Vietnamese regime in their counter-revolutionary efforts. Hence, the communists in Source A were far warier of American support as a source of South Vietnamese strength, since the extent of US involvement was larger. However, the tide had turned by 1963: the Vietcong had earned a stunning military victory in the Battle of Ap Bac that shook American resolve, and declining US faith in the South Vietnamese regime throughout the Buddhist crisis is revealed by Cable 243 in August, which effectively endorsed the coup that would depose Diem. Hence, even though Mao was likely unaware of the full extent of US disillusionment, it would be apparent that US support for Diem is nowhere as resolute as the year before.

Further, their varying provenances shed light on the differing portrayals. Source B is a statement by Mao to a Vietcong delegation, in which Mao would be forced to indulge in formal pleasantries about his optimistic hopes for the success of their revolution since they are ideological allies united by communism. Hence, American support for Diem would not be presented as a significant obstacle to the National Liberation Front. Comparatively, Source A is a Singaporean academic’s article written in 2000, benefitting from a large amount of historical distance that enables him to write a more nuanced account of the war. Additionally, his access to Vietnamese sources allows him to detail internal communication among the communists (e.g. Le Duan’s letter), providing an insider perspective on the strength of the

South Vietnamese regime. Hence, he is able to offer a balanced, objective presentation of Diem's strength — weak on his own, but stronger with US backing.

(b) How far do Sources A-F support the view that US policy in Vietnam was motivated by fear of communism?

Sources A and D support the view, while Sources B, C, E and F disagree for varying reasons.

Sources A and D collectively argue that US policy in Vietnam primarily sought to prevent the feared spread of communism to the rest of Southeast Asia. In Source A, Le Duan "explained that the Americans believed a socialist Vietnam would serve as a springboard for the spread of socialism in Southeast Asia", before urging South Vietnamese communists to "play down the political element of their struggle" to "prevent a war" with the US. In this light, US military involvement in Vietnam seems largely oriented around the goal of containing the spread of communism in the region, making fear of communism a central motivation behind US policy. Source B paints a similar picture: McNamara argues a communist victory in Vietnam would be the first step towards "eventual Chinese hegemony over… Southeast Asia" and "communism absorb[ing] Southeast Asia's people and resources", with the presentation of this doomsday scenario elucidating the intensity of American fears of a communist takeover. McNamara further equates "defend[ing] Southeast Asia" with "meet[ing] the challenge in South Vietnam", indicating that this aforementioned ideological fear was a driving factor for US policy in Vietnam. Hence, Sources A and D contend that US actions in Vietnam are inextricably tied to deep-rooted fears of communist expansion.

This argument has empirical merit: in fact, Eisenhower himself argued in 1954 that a communist takeover in Indochina would catalyse the spread of communism to the region like a series of "falling dominos", coining the "domino theory" that would be utilised by both Kennedy and Johnson to explain US policy in Vietnam. Additionally, the US had a track record of funding anti-communist efforts in Vietnam: it provided $2 billion in military and economic aid to the French during the First Indochina War, funding 80% of the costs incurred by the French campaign to defeat the Vietminh. Additionally, the US urged Diem to carry out land reforms in 1956 and resettle villagers away from the Vietcong into American compounds under the 1962 Strategic Hamlet Programme to undercut communist support. Hence, containing communism was indeed a key objective of US involvement in Vietnam.

On their own, Source A and Source D may have deficits in utility — Source A presents US motivations only indirectly through the accounts of the Vietnamese communists, making it less conclusive as evidence for American fears of communism. On the other hand, Source D is a public speech by Defence Secretary McNamara, one of the strongest supporters of the war. Hence, McNamara would have to justify increased US involvement in Vietnam via the

lens of Cold War competition, making it probable that he might have overstated the extent of the communist threat and the role it played in shaping US policy behind the scenes. However, the fact that Sources A and D — comprising the perspectives of both North Vietnamese and American leaders on both sides of the Cold War — concur that fear of communism was a prominent motivation makes up for these deficits, making this argument a fairly strong one.

On the flip side, Source B rejects this view, instead contending that US policy in Vietnam was motivated by imperialistic impulses. Mao cites the US "obstructing the reunification of Vietnam" and "unleash[ing] a counter-revolutionary war" as evidence of "US imperialism", before accusing the US outright of seeking to "turn South Vietnam into a colony". Additionally, the local communist resistance is called a "just patriotic struggle for liberation", implicitly reinforcing the characterisation of the US as an exploitative imperial power attempting to subjugate the nation to its rule. Hence, US policy appears to be driven by self-interested, imperialistic desires rather than an ideological fear of socialism.

There are some kernels of truth in this argument, but the extent of US control over South Vietnam is vastly overstated. While the US did obstruct reunification by supporting Diem's refusal to hold elections for a unified Vietnam in 1956, Mao neglects to mention not only that the US never signed the Geneva Accords but also that Diem refused to hold the elections of his own accord. Additionally, while the US did conduct search-and-destroy missions and spray defoliants by August 1963, both Eisenhower and Kennedy had refused to send ground troops, making claims of a "counter-revolutionary war" hyperbolic at this time. Further, Source C highlights that US military aid was in fact given at the "request" of Diem himself rather than forcibly imposed on an unwilling South Vietnamese government, making accusations of "imperialism" largely unfounded.

This argument is even weaker upon a close examination of Source B's provenance: it is a statement by Mao to a Vietcong delegation. Hence, Mao would not only have to laud their resistance efforts as "just" and "patriotic" as part of diplomatic courtesies, but his statement would also unsurprisingly foreground their ideological unity using the larger context of Cold War competition. Hence, Mao is likely to have exaggerated the "imperialism" of their common ideological enemy America in an attempt to forge ties with the Vietcong.

Sources C and E offer an alternative explanation of US motives that directly contradicts Source B: they argue that US actions in Vietnam were driven by the benevolent aim of protecting peace and South Vietnam. In Source C, Kennedy states that the US is "devoted to the cause of peace" and its "primary purpose" is to "maintain [the] independence" of South Vietnam. In fact, protecting South Vietnam seems to be the only motivation: Kennedy

declares that US defence aid “will no longer be necessary” once North Vietnam ceases their “campaign to destroy” the South, implying that the US has no other reasons for continued involvement in Vietnam. Hence, the altruistic cause of safeguarding the South appears to be the US’s principal motive. Source E tells a similar story: Johnson contextualises US involvement in Vietnam amidst “the struggle for peace and security in Southeast Asia”, before lamenting the “aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Vietnam” and “open aggression” towards the US. In this light, US actions in Vietnam are merely a defensive response to halt North Vietnamese belligerence and restore peace to South Vietnam. The US’s commitment to peace is further evinced by Johnson’s pledge to carry out a “limited” response and seek “no wider war”. Thus, Sources C and E both present the protection of South Vietnam’s sovereignty and peace as central to US policy there.

However, there is reason to believe US motives were not so altruistic: even though the Geneva Accords provided for elections in 1956 that would have peacefully unified Vietnam and secured Vietnamese independence, the US subsequently backed Diem in refusing to hold the elections, ostensibly fearing that the communist Ho Chi Minh would rise to power. This reveals an important caveat: the US would protect peace and sovereignty only if it did not leave the communists in power.

The argument is ostensibly reinforced by Source D, in which McNamara claims the US’s “ultimate goal” is to “help maintain free and independent nations”. However, all three sources that advance this view suffer from similar biases in perspective: Sources C, D and E were all made by American leaders (i.e. Kennedy, McNamara, Johnson) with similar incentives to present US motivations as altruistic in nature. McNamara’s speech and Johnson’s national address were both attempts for the two hawkish leaders to justify their advocacy for more aggressive military intervention in Vietnam; Johnson especially had to play up the noble objectives of defending “freedom” and “peace” in order to justify sending large numbers of troops and fight a full-scale war in Vietnam. For Source C, a letter from Kennedy to Diem, it is a diplomatic necessity for Kennedy to acknowledge the interests of Diem and South Vietnam, making his account of US desires to protect South Vietnam less reflective of America’s true motivations. Against this backdrop of limited perspective and likely unreliability, this argument is not entirely persuasive.

Finally, Source F argues that the US’s continued involvement in Vietnam was not because of lingering fears over communism but rather because it was trapped in it: America’s own policies in Vietnam made it hard for it to leave. Source F depicts a figure labelled the US on a small, fragile-looking boat, fishing in waters labelled “Vietnam” and “Thailand” in a representation of US policy there. The boat is precariously balanced on the edge of a large

whirlpool that symbolises “still deeper involvement in Asia”: just as it is exceedingly hard to escape from a whirlpool, the US is exceedingly likely to be stuck in a vicious cycle of escalating intervention in Vietnam and the rest of Asia. Hence, US policy is presented as far from a calculated attempt to contain communism — rather, it is a product of the US’s past actions in Vietnam.

The cartoon’s presentation of the US’s “still deeper involvement in Asia” is perhaps hyperbolic: the speculative prediction that the US would be trapped in the Asian region could not be proven in 1967. However, there is an empirical basis to the claim that past US actions vis-a-vis Vietnam left America increasingly stuck there by 1967: years of inconclusive search-and-destroy operations and Operation Ranch Hand prompted Republican Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater to accuse Johnson of being “soft on communism” in 1964, spurring him to escalate involvement into a full-scale war. Additionally, Johnson’s miscalculation that the Vietcong could be easily defeated — as evinced in Source E when he promises a “limited” intervention — led to the US being drawn into a lengthy war, with communist troops tripling even after three years of Operation Rolling Thunder. With no victory in sight and mounting domestic opposition to the war in 1967, it was increasingly clear that Johnson had backed himself into a corner in Vietnam. Hence, the argument that the US trapped itself in Vietnam is fairly compelling.

Ultimately, however, all the arguments face inherent temporal limitations — the supporting claim that the US feared the spread of communism, while grounded in reality, was advanced by sources that only examine the narrow time frame between 1962 and 1964. The sources for the competing contentions that the US was motivated by imperialistic or altruistic impulses not only have clear biases, but also once again cover a narrow sliver of time (1961-64). Hence, none of these arguments adequately account for the entirety of US policy in Vietnam, spanning over two decades from Eisenhower to Nixon.

Therefore, US motivations vary depending on the period: the strong empirical bases of Sources A and D suggest that fear of communism was indeed a key motivating factor up to Johnson’s escalation in the mid-1960s. However, Source F reveals that after US military progress stalled towards the late-1960s, ideological fears faded in prominence as US policy in Vietnam became centred around one principal objective: to escape the quagmire it created for itself.