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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Moscow's Position in the Current Vietnam Situation

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Moscow's Position in the Current Vietnam Situation

1. Soviet military aid has been indispensable in arming North Vietnam with the capability of mounting its present offensive. Yet we think it wrong to conclude from this that Moscow has conspired with Hanoi over the last year to bring about exactly the present state of affairs. In fact, in their strategic planning the North Vietnamese have taken pains to keep both the Soviets and the Chinese at arms length, fearing to be drawn into a bargaining relationship which would invite the use of foreign leverage and compromise the integrity of their national policymaking. Instead, they have relied upon the obligations of Communist solidarity, and even more upon the rivalry between Moscow and Peking, to assure the necessary flow of supplies while keeping major decisions about the war in their own hands.

2. The Soviets clearly have not been unwitting of the buildup of North Vietnamese strength over the past year. But they have long been committed to military support of the DRV, and at least some of the aid agreements covering Soviet-supplied materiel being used in the present offensive were almost certainly made before the Soviets arranged the Moscow summit. In the event, the precise timing of the North Vietnamese offensive has highlighted the contradiction in Soviet policy between the desire to support its ally and the desire to engage the US in a summit meeting. But it would have been extremely difficult in the second half of 1971, as a summit began to take shape, to muster a majority of the Soviet collective leadership behind the proposition that North Vietnam should be pressed to stand down, particularly since there could have been no assurance that Hanoi would comply, or that Peking would not increase its aid to fill the gap. At the same time, the improvement in Sino-US relations was increasing the Soviet stake in its own summit policy.

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Present Soviet Objectives

3. The Soviets still deem it essential to maintain, both in posture and in reality, their support of North Vietnam. Their commitment of prestige is heavy and long-standing. To break ranks now would expose them to telling criticism from Peking and Hanoi, arouse contempt and misgivings among other Communist states, and risk their prospects for a substantial future role in Southeast Asia. Further, they believe that, if they drew back now, the US would conclude that it had bested the Soviet Union in an important contest of will, and that they would in consequence be at a considerable disadvantage in the summit bargaining. All these concerns will be weighing upon the Soviets as they canvass ways to contain the Vietnamese situation in order to permit the summit meeting to go forward. In the process, however, they will want to preserve the chances for eventual success of Hanoi's cause, even though they do not wish that cause to be pushed, at the present juncture, to limits which jeopardize larger Soviet interests.

Present Soviet Options

4. One Soviet option is to wait--to hope that the US will forebear from further strikes in the deep north, that the fighting will slow down in the South, and that by mid-May Vietnam will have receded sufficiently into the background to permit the summit to take place in the atmosphere originally intended. This is in fact what the Soviets are doing now, with their restrained public statements, their protest carefully confined to the fate of their ships in Haiphong, and their willingness to continue ongoing bilateral talks. But this is probably no more than a holding action as the Soviet leaders debate their future course; they probably do not expect that either Hanoi or Washington will back down of its own volition. Thus they will be considering how they might work on both parties to bring the situation under control.

5. With respect to Hanoi, interrupting military shipments is not a realistic Soviet option. Moscow knows that even an immediate and total cut-off would not affect North Vietnamese capabilities on the southern battlefields during the next five weeks. It almost certainly calculates that Hanoi would fight on, and that Moscow would have to suffer all the consequences

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described above in paragraph 3. In fact, Hanoi may choose the present occasion to ask for additional assistance, in part intending to put Soviet support to the test, and the USSR would probably feel compelled to meet the request.

6. From the viewpoint of its relations with Hanoi, the USSR's best option is to encourage any interest which might appear in a new start on negotiations. This is a delicate matter. Moscow will be acutely aware that pressure on North Vietnam to alter its negotiating position is likely to be both dangerous and futile. While the Soviets might try delicately to put any proposals passing from Washington to Hanoi in a positive light, we do not believe that they would press their ally to accept terms which the North Vietnamese considered a compromise of their basic position.

7. With respect to the US, the USSR will not have similar inhibitions about commending DRV negotiating proposals. But it will not have much expectation that any proposals from either side will resolve the crisis soon. It will therefore be searching for ways to generate additional pressures on the US to de-escalate its attacks upon the North within a negotiating framework acceptable to Hanoi.

8. The means of pressure available to them are limited. They could quickly insert limited air or naval forces into the area, thereby posing the threat of a Soviet-US military confrontation. But this would be a highly risky move, leaving to the US the initiative of whether to engage inferior Soviet forces. We think that these risks would, in the Soviet view, exceed their stakes. Thus they would probably choose instead to create a political linkage between Vietnam and other problems of priority interest to the US, threatening that the US will suffer in other ways if it persists in unacceptable attacks upon North Vietnam. Moscow would calculate that this course would have the advantage of mobilizing domestic US opinion against the President's Vietnam policy.

9. At some point, therefore, we expect the Soviets to begin to intimate to the US that bilateral US-USSR relations will be deeply affected by further such US attacks. They will start to do this when they conclude that the US intends, not merely to make a limited manifestation of its willingness to bomb the populated north, but to persist in this course. They have a variety of

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ways to pursue this tactic. They might gradually introduce a more threatening tenor into their public statements; they might pass private statements through intelligence or other channels; they might begin to drag their feet in SALT or other negotiating forums; they might make a blunt, high-level approach. Whatever the tactics, the message they would be seeking to convey would be that, if deep bombing raids on North Vietnam were to continue, the USSR could not receive the US President on 22 May.

10. In our judgment, this would be a serious message, not a bluff. We believe that in fact the collective leadership would find it both easier and preferable not to receive the President while the US is attacking the DRV on the scale of the past weekend.

11. If matters came to this pass, there would probably be considerable debate among the Soviet leaders as to whether they should confine themselves to postponing the summit (and other bilateral talks), in order to limit the damage, or convert their frustration into a general recasting of their policy toward the US in the direction of invective and hostility. Proponents of the former course would argue that Soviet interests of real import--primarily arms control and increased trade--were worth salvaging, and that it would be fruitless as well as demeaning to defer to anticipated Chinese criticism. Opponents of this view, perhaps including some who harbored earlier reservations about summitry, would argue for a sharp reversal on the grounds that this would fortify the USSR's position in the Communist world, would not seriously damage the Soviet position in Europe, and might even improve it in the Middle East and South Asia. They would further argue that this course would strengthen domestic US criticism of an American Vietnam policy which could be represented as having sabotaged the summit. We are inclined to think that the former view would prevail, but the issue might become entwined in factional struggle, with unpredictable results.

A Special Contingency

12. A US attempt to close the port of Haiphong, by mining or blockade, would pose an issue of a different order. The Soviets would perceive this as a direct challenge to themselves. To the rest of the world, it

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would appear in much the same light (during the missile crisis of 1962, once the US announced a naval quarantine, Cuba became incidental).

13. We see little likelihood that the Soviets would contest such a measure with force, say, by providing naval escorts for their Haiphong-bound ships. The local military balance overwhelmingly favors the US. The issue would not be so grave as to lead the Soviets to run the risks of provoking a military counter-confrontation elsewhere in the world. Instead, we believe that they would withdraw the invitation to the President, probably in a hostile and acrimonious manner. Thereafter, they would take other retaliatory steps, perhaps including a controlled testing of any blockade. Whatever the specific measures they attempted, the Soviets would almost certainly issue grave warnings and attempt to create the impression that a major world crisis could soon result from the US action.

Conclusions

14. In sum, we believe that the USSR will continue its political support to North Vietnam in the present situation. It will probably feel compelled to meet new requests for military aid. It will wish to contain tensions so that the May summit can take place, and to this end it will want to facilitate any US-North Vietnamese negotiations which might promise an early resolution. But it will not push Hanoi to alter its negotiating position substantially, fearing to forfeit its position in Vietnam in a futile effort. If US bombing continues deep inside North Vietnam, the Soviets will warn that they cannot hold the summit meeting as scheduled. If the bombing continues in the face of these warnings, they are likely to postpone the summit and might turn to a hostile line vis-a-vis the US across the board. If Haiphong is mined or blockaded, the more extreme of these reactions is likely, and a major Soviet-American crisis would be at hand.

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