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20 December 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable North Vietnamese Reaction to
Certain Clandestine Operations*

1. Operations Against North Vietnam --Hanoi Reaction. Hanoi's reaction would, initially at least, depend largely upon the nature of the target attacked, the means of attack, and the success of the operation. The North Vietnamese have always recognized the great danger of the overt employment of identifiable forces against South Vietnam and probably would not respond by using such forces in retaliation. Aerial reconnaissance, aerial infiltration, covert ground operations and their aerial supply are, in our opinion, within the unwritten ground rules of the conflict. However, air attack, even with black aircraft, would create a different situation and could lead to embarrassing and difficult consequences for the US. We believe that any covert operations in North Vietnam would result in propaganda charges of US planning and participation. In the case of air action, these charges would strike a responsive chord in world opinion and in the ICC, where the charges would almost certainly be brought. The USSR would probably support them, and the UK would be seriously embarrassed. In any event, one probable result would be the appearance of a "North Vietnamese Air Force" equipped with fighters from Communist China.

* Prepared in consultation with
OCI and DDP.

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2. Operations Based in Laos - Hanoi Response. The reaction and response to reconnaissance would probably be minimal. Reaction to ground action would, as in the case of operations based in South Vietnam, depend largely upon their degree of success. If the North Vietnamese believed it necessary to introduce additional North Vietnamese forces into Laos, they would almost certainly do so. The chances of a general Communist offensive in Laos would increase, but the North Vietnamese would probably not follow this course initially. Charges of new US intervention would almost certainly be made, and these would probably create additional difficulties for Souvanna Phouma and prompt our European allies to fear that US actions would destroy the Laos settlement.

3. General Consequences. We believe it unlikely that the operations suggested would reduce Viet Cong capabilities in South Vietnam to any noteworthy degree since the Viet Cong have for some time relied primarily upon local resources for both men and supplies. We also believe it unlikely that such operations would materially affect North Vietnamese intentions or scale or activity in South Vietnam unless they were prolonged and repetitive.

4. Should similar operations continue over a period of some months and become increasingly bold and successful, the North Vietnamese might come to believe that the US and South Vietnam were prepared to engage in stepped-up activities such as overt air strikes and naval blockade. If they concluded that the US was prepared to go so far, they might further

conclude that it would be prudent to allow a lull to develop in the guerrilla war, hoping thereby to encourage the US and South Vietnam to relax their pressure. They would recognize that such a lull might give the new regime in the south more time to reorganize its anti-guerrilla program, but they might also believe that a lull would have a demoralizing effect by creating a sense of false security in South Vietnam and by freeing political forces within the country of the constraints imposed by imminent danger.

5. Alternatively, if such operations were continued and became increasingly threatening, the North Vietnamese might seize the opportunity to create an atmosphere of international crisis and endeavor to force the Chinese Communists and the USSR to come to their material and diplomatic assistance. We think this is at least as likely as an effort to soft-pedal the guerrilla war, and it could be more difficult to handle. If the creation of a crisis resulted in an international conference in which charges against the US could be aired, the US might be confronted with heavy pressure from neutrals and allies alike to withdraw under conditions which would lead to a Viet Cong victory.

6. We believe it unlikely that clandestine activities of the type suggested within North Vietnam would create any serious political difficulties within the country. The population, though dissatisfied and probably disaffected, is cowed and probably would not respond to sabotage

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alone. Any serious threat to the regime's political control would probably require the creation of a resistance movement prepared and supported from the south over an extended period.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

[REDACTED]

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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ESTIMATED NORTH VIETNAMESE REACTION TO THE
SPECIFIC OPERATIONS MENTIONED IN SAIG 3236,
20 DECEMBER 1963.

1. Destruction at Vinh of 20 percent of total DRV POL storage capability (include reaction if destruction results from sabotage by teams infiltrated for that purpose and reaction if destruction occurs by virtue of air attack).

Our views on the probable consequences of any air attack have been stated above. A successful ground attack on the Vinh POL storage depot would probably produce a barrage of Hanoi propaganda. Hanoi might try to launch a retaliatory Viet Cong attack in the south (e.g., an attack against the storage facilities at Nha Be near Saigon). We do not believe, however, that even a successful attack on Vinh would produce a DRV reaction likely to change the character of the war.

2. Sabotage of Haiphong harbor by sinking dredges, buoy tenders, or sinking a ship at the mouth of the harbor in order to block it.

Hanoi would probably try to impute direct US guilt in any such operation, perhaps claiming it to be the work of a US submarine. (This charge would be hard to support, however, since the harbor entrance is only eight fathoms deep.) Apart from making propaganda outcries, Hanoi is not likely to respond in fashion that could be particularly

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damaging to US interests. For some time the Viet Cong have been building their strength in the Rung Sat area along the Saigon River (Saigon's outlet to the sea) and as a retaliatory gesture the VC might try to harass shipping coming in to Saigon. However, this is something the VC are likely to do anyway, if they acquire the ability. Hence a successful attack upon Haiphong would not in itself generate any new threat to Saigon, though in retaliation the VC would probably intensify their efforts in this area.

3. Air strike or company size action against the Isle du Tigre, located in the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ).

Again, our general comments on air strikes apply here. Even a ground attack on any target actually within the DMZ would raise political problems (e.g. certain ICC condemnation). But our reading of the 1954 treaty indicates that the Isle du Tigre is clearly North Vietnamese territory and is not located within the DMZ. Such an attack would probably not spark a major North Vietnamese military reaction or change the character of the war.

4. Laos-based Meo interdiction of routes in North Vietnam.

Harassment activity by the Meo is already taking place. To step it up to the degree necessary would require extensive air operations over Communist territory in both Laos and North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese would react locally to Meo incursions into North Vietnam as

strongly as they were able and would probably intensify their efforts to eliminate Meo pockets and base areas now existing within the Communist-dominated areas of Laos. Furthermore, the chances of a general Communist offensive in Laos would increase, but the North Vietnamese would probably not follow this course initially. Charges of new US intervention would almost certainly be made, and these would probably create additional difficulties for Souvanna Phouma and prompt our European allies to fear that US actions would destroy the Laos settlement.

5. Overflight of Laos for low level reconnaissance.

Hanoi will almost certainly protest any such activity, but is not likely to do much more. Such flights will, of course, be subject to such ground fire and other harassment as the Communists can generate.

6. South Vietnamese interdiction of supplies and destruction of dumps and other concentrations in the DRV through operations conducted from Laos (concept here is that South Vietnamese teams would be entering North Vietnam from bases in Laos either on foot or in helicopter and light STOL aircraft).

North Vietnamese reaction would be largely determined by the size of the teams, frequency of their raids, and success of their operations. Some minor sabotage activity in North Vietnam is already going on. If the level and success of present activity is not markedly increased, Hanoi's

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reaction is not likely to change in any major respect. Should larger teams begin achieving some success, the Communists would probably attempt strong local reaction and would try to seize -- or, at least, destroy -- the bases from which such operations were being mounted, using whatever force was necessary. Should this force require additional introduction of North Vietnamese units into Laos, such units would probably be introduced. Extensive use of helicopters or STOL craft for infiltration or resupply would probably produce renewed charges of US intervention in Laotian affairs and a propaganda campaign that might succeed in making our French and British allies uneasy.

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