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SPECIAL REPORT

THE SOVIET PREDICAMENT IN VIETNAM

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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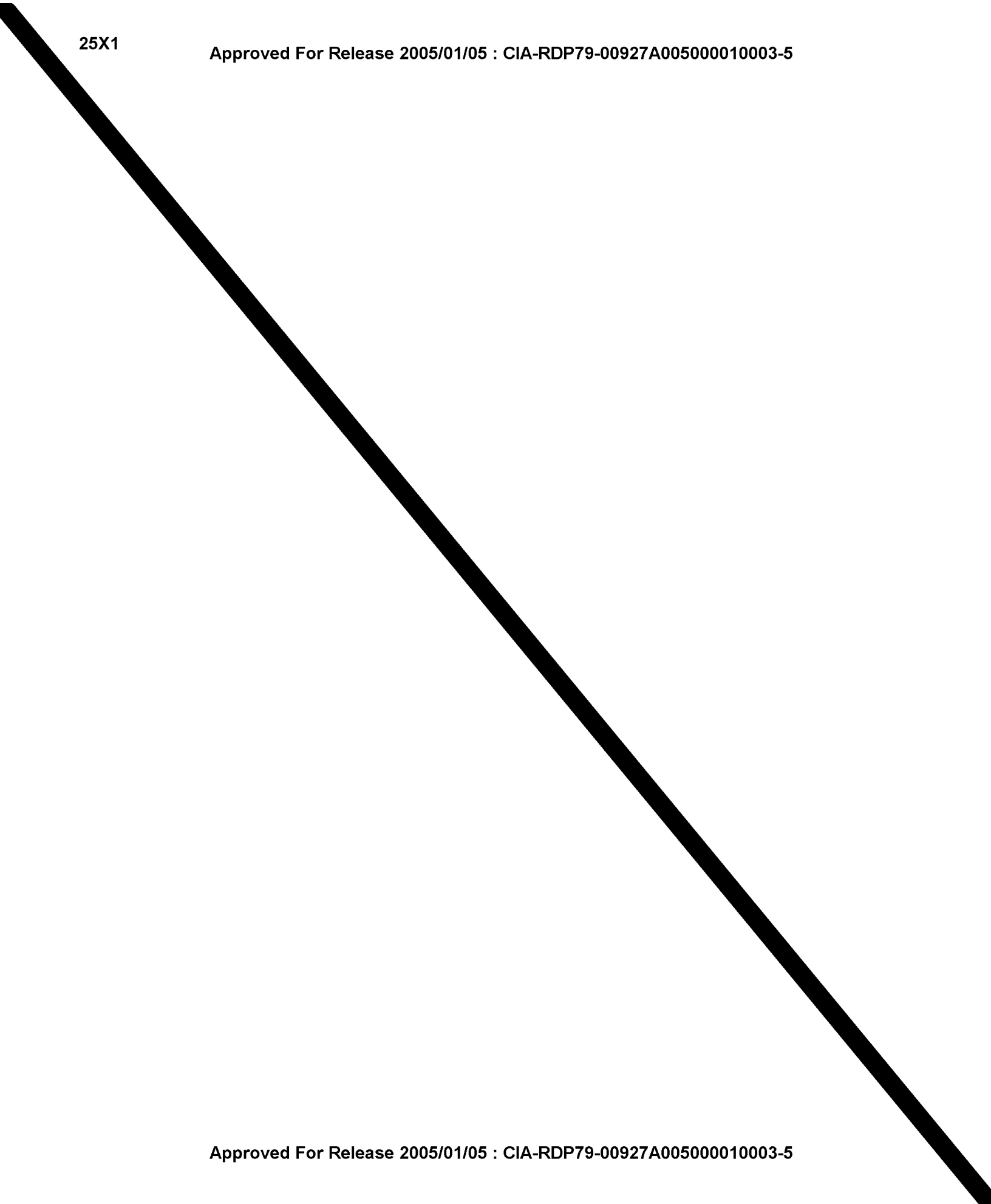

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THE SOVIET PREDICAMENT IN VIETNAM

The Soviet leaders are under heavy strain in their dealings with both the United States and Communist China because of conflicting pressures arising out of the Vietnam situation. Since last February, developments in the conflict have drawn the USSR into a deeper involvement than the new leaders intended last fall when they decided to reverse Khrushchev's policy of disengagement. Moscow was apparently convinced that trends in the South Vietnam conflict had made noninvolvement an untenable position. The new leaders also wished to reassert Soviet influence in Hanoi, and in the Communist movement generally, and this required a more assertive posture in supporting North Vietnam.

Over the past six months Moscow has made a variety of erratic and improvised moves to cope with the consequences of its miscalculation of both US and North Vietnamese/Viet Cong intentions. Although the Kremlin is now primarily concerned with reducing the heat in the Vietnam conflict and with probing for a basis to begin negotiations, the Soviet leaders have given little indication of their views on the configuration of an eventual political settlement. Indeed, the extent of Soviet military assistance to Hanoi as well as military developments beyond Moscow's control have obliged them to accept the risks of greater involvement. Nevertheless, the Russians are keeping open their contacts with all interested governments and reaffirming their desire to improve US-Soviet relations in order to proceed with urgent tasks of domestic reform and growth.

Decision to Reassert Soviet Influence

The decision of Soviet leaders to reverse Khrushchev's policy of disengagement was part of a program for repairing Soviet authority in the world Communist movement and for restoring Soviet influence in North Vietnam. However, it has failed to halt Peiping's polemical attacks and efforts to split pro-Soviet Communist parties. It has also led the USSR into a dangerous entanglement in a conflict over which Moscow has little or no control. Moscow, therefore, has felt compelled by US air strikes against North Vietnam and the build-up of US power in South Vietnam to issue increasingly bitter denunciations of American policies and leaders. These denunciations cannot fail to undermine the rationale of fundamental

Soviet policies anchored to the doctrine of peaceful coexistence. These harsh attacks on the US, and the consequent deterioration in Soviet-US relations, have exposed the USSR to damaging Chinese claims that the Vietnam conflict proves the validity of their indictment of Soviet revisionist policy toward the US.

Another dimension of the Soviet dilemma in Vietnam is that Moscow has been forced into the humiliating position of revealing itself as powerless to prevent direct military attacks by and against a member of the socialist camp. This situation is without precedent in the East-West contest since the Korean War and violates the Cold War "ground rules" which the Soviets have long sought to establish--that neither side would undertake direct military action against a member of the opposing bloc. This basic assumption--that the East-West competition would be conducted without the invocation of military force--has provided the rationale and justification not only for the peaceful coexistence policy but for other major elements of Soviet policy. These include modest reductions in the military budget, the limited test ban treaty, expensive commitments to overcome agricultural problems, and greater emphasis on the welfare of Soviet consumers.

Background of the Soviet Dilemma

The irony of the Soviet leaders' present situation is that they find themselves deeply entangled in an area in which they have no vital strategic interests and in which their Chinese rivals have heavy political and geographical advantages.

Moreover, the Russians have been obliged to take actions sharply departing from their practices over the past decade, which consistently subordinated Soviet objectives in Indochina to higher priority interests elsewhere, particularly with respect to the German problem. The Soviet Union has never been greatly concerned about the states of Indochina. Soviet policy in this area has always been determined by the shifting requirements and conditions of relations with the West and with the Chinese.

In 1954, for example, the Russians did not hesitate to subordinate Viet Minh interests to the urgent objective of blocking West German rearmament within the context of the proposed European Defense Community (EDC). At that time, Moscow in effect traded the armistice in Indochina for French rejection of the EDC treaty. In the late 1950s, Khrushchev repeatedly found that the protracted struggle in Indochina complicated his pursuit of a Berlin and German settlement with the Western powers. The Laos "crisis" of 1959 seriously embarrassed Khrushchev at the time of his visit to the US. Soviet spokesmen then stressed the USSR's desire to prevent any aggravation of the Laos situation which might jeopardize chances for a detente with the US.

The freeze in US-Soviet relations in the second half of 1960, following the U-2 incident and the collapse of the Paris summit meeting in May, temporarily removed this incentive for restraint. In December 1960, the USSR reacted vigorously to the rightist overthrow of Souvanna Phouma's neutralist government of that period and intervened with an airlift to supply Communist forces in Laos. Khrushchev, however, quickly shifted back to a conciliatory line following President Kennedy's inauguration and cooperated with the US and Britain to bring about a cease-fire in Laos and the 14-nation conference which produced the Geneva Accords of 1962. Khrushchev's main purpose in endorsing a neutral and independent Laos under international agreements at his meeting with President Kennedy in Vienna was to remove Laos as a barrier to resuming negotiations with the new American administration on the higher priority Berlin and German questions.

The sharp aggravation of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the months following the Cuban missile crisis strengthened Khrushchev's reluctance to cooperate with the West in implementing the Laos accords. He became increasingly unwilling to do anything that would antagonize the North Vietnamese and provide ammunition to the Chinese. He tried to wash his hands of the Laos problem in 1963 and 1964.

Soviet Policy in Vietnam

Khrushchev's course in dealing with the more important and potentially dangerous Vietnam conflict was marked by considerable equivocation. The USSR made routine approaches to the British co-chairman condemning US "interference" in South Vietnam, but these initiatives appeared intended primarily to establish a record. The Hanoi regime's growing alignment with Peiping's positions following the abortive Sino-Soviet talks and the nuclear test ban treaty in the summer of 1963 strengthened Khrushchev's intention to pursue a line of noninvolvement in Vietnam. He did not attempt to counter the deepening American commitment in South Vietnam beginning in 1962 with pledges to strengthen Hanoi's defensive capacity. Khrushchev consistently believed that no Soviet interests would be served by becoming involved in the Vietnam duel between the US and Hanoi and Peiping. This judgment was clearly reflected in his tardy and equivocal reaction to the Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964.

The decision to reverse Khrushchev's basic policy of noninvolvement in Indochina was also based on Moscow's assessment of the prospects in relations with the West. The Soviets appeared to foresee no chance of fruitful negotiations on the key issues of Berlin and Germany and no prospects for further agreements in the field of arms control.

Although the new Soviet leaders were prepared to accept some deterioration in their relations with the US, they apparently felt that limited ges-

tures of greater support for Hanoi would not be incompatible with maintaining a vague atmosphere of relaxation with the West. At that time, Moscow apparently proceeded on the assumption that the US administration had no desire to expand the war and that it was genuinely interested in seeking a basis for a political settlement. It probably calculated that a stronger Soviet presence in North Vietnam would provide additional insurance against a repetition of the US air strikes at the time of the Tonkin Gulf incident.

The Russians, however, may well have been less confident that Hanoi would refrain from actions that might again provoke US retaliation and lead to a dangerous spiral of escalation. One of the main purposes of Premier Kosygin's mission to Hanoi last February probably was to warn the North Vietnamese not to underestimate US determination to prevent a Communist victory in the south. He probably also sought an understanding with the Hanoi regime on the conduct of the war in exchange for Soviet military and economic assistance and greater political support. It seems likely that he urged them to hold the door open for a negotiated settlement based on some form of neutralization of South Vietnam.

There is also evidence that even earlier Moscow urged a cautious line and negotiations at various international Communist gatherings. The Chinese charged that the Soviet delegate to the "international solidarity conference" in Hanoi last November advocated a moderate approach to a Vietnamese settlement and claimed that the conference repudiated "efforts to whitewash US imperialism" and to aid "US policies of aggression." [redacted] 25X1
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WFTU meeting in Hanoi in June witnessed another Soviet-Chinese clash and the Chinese failed to win conference endorsement for the shipment of arms and men to North Vietnam. Peiping has issued similar denunciations of Soviet counsels of restraint at the WPC session in Helsinki last month.

The Price of Miscalculation

The record of Soviet policy over the past six months has been one of erratic and improvised attempts to cope with the consequences of the miscalculation of both US and North Vietnamese/ Viet Cong intentions. The Viet Cong attack on US installations at Pleiku and US reprisals against North Vietnam shortly after Kosygin arrived in Hanoi last February placed the Soviets at an impasse.

Ambassador Dobrynin acknowledged to [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] n April that the Rus- 25X1
sians had misjudged US policy and misconstrued the presidential election campaign last year, saying that the Soviets "thought they were dealing with FDR, but they now know they are not." Soviet spokesmen attempted privately to cover their embarassment at the humiliation suffered by Kosygin by contending that

the Chinese had inspired the Viet Cong raid in order to disrupt Soviet-US relations.

Soviet Attitude Toward Negotiations

After Kosygin's cautious bid in late February for a Vietnam solution "at a conference table" drew an angry public reaction from Peiping and private opposition from Hanoi, the Soviet leaders decided that without realistic prospects for negotiations there was nothing to be gained by further public initiatives. Such proposals would only expose the USSR to Chinese accusations that it was sacrificing Hanoi's interests and capitulating to US pressure. Soviet policy on negotiations, therefore, has remained unchanged since last spring and the Russians have indicated that their hands are tied so long as the air strikes against North Vietnam continue.

They have continued to express the view privately, however, that they believe negotiations are ultimately necessary. They foresee no satisfactory alternative for extricating themselves from the present impasse. Moscow rejects the Chinese thesis that a major defeat can and must be imposed on the US and it fully recognizes that Peiping's ambitions are best served by a prolonged conflict which will increasingly discredit Soviet foreign policy and strengthen pressures to change it. Soviet officials have asserted privately that the USSR has no desire to see American power withdrawn from Southeast Asia because this would lead to an expansion of Chinese influence there.

Kosygin has taken the position that no one has authorized the Soviet Union to conduct talks on behalf of North Vietnam and the Liberation Front and that he could not "presume to take action on Hanoi's behalf without a request to do so." Soviet officials, nevertheless, have been alert to respond to any openings for nudging the conflict toward negotiations. Moscow, for example, reacted to President Johnson's 7 April Baltimore address by publishing on 8 April its co-chairman draft message on a Cambodian conference which had been conveyed to the British on 3 April.

Since the Soviet leaders are now primarily concerned with reducing the heat in the Vietnam conflict and with probing for a basis for beginning negotiations, they have given little indication of their conception of an eventual political settlement. Soviet spokesmen in the past month have renewed private assurances of the USSR's continuing interest in a negotiated settlement and have hinted that a cessation of the air strikes would produce a positive response from Hanoi. They have also taken the line that Hanoi's four-point formula does not represent a hard and fast precondition for negotiations and that its only real terms are a termination of the bombings and US agreement to deal with the National Liberation Front.

In view of the precedents established by the presence of two German delegations as "observers" at the 1959 Foreign Ministers' Conference and the representation of the three rival Laotian factions at the 1961-62 Geneva conference, Moscow probably believes that the US eventually will accept some form of Viet Cong participation in any negotiations.

As in the case of the Laos settlement, Moscow probably foresees a cease-fire based on the prevailing military situation as the necessary first step in establishing a basis for negotiations. The Russians could be expected to argue that a cease-fire would not prejudice the positions of either side on critical political issues such as the eventual withdrawal of foreign troops, creation of a coalition government in South Vietnam, and provisions for the reunification of Vietnam.

As for the shape of an eventual political settlement, the Soviets have hinted they are willing to accept the continued existence of two Vietnams, similar to the two Germanies and the two Koreas. They have also recently expressed renewed interest in a settlement based on the neutralization of Vietnam, and possibly of all of Southeast Asia, under great power guarantees.

These tentative approaches, however, probably are intended primarily as assurances of Soviet restraint and interest in some form of a negotiated settlement. The Soviet Union, in any negotiations that may emerge, will have little choice but to go along with Hanoi's positions. In contrast to the impressive display of concerted tactics by the Communist delegations at the 1954 Geneva conference and at the Laos negotiations in 1961-62 in which the Communists managed to maintain coordinated positions for the most part, the Soviets may find themselves the "minority" member of the Communist negotiating team in a new round of talks. Their freedom of maneuver, in any event, is bound to be more sharply circumscribed than in previous Indochina conferences.

The Outlook for Soviet Policy

The Soviet leaders appear to see no prospects of an early break in the diplomatic stalemate, but they seem determined to hold the line against deeper involvement in the Vietnam conflict and to resist pressures from the Chinese, and possibly some elements within the USSR, to reverse or substantially modify their present course. Moscow's ambiguous posture in this crisis is consistent with the broader pattern of its pragmatic response to the difficult problem of managing its relations with its two great rivals--the US and China. In these circumstances, Moscow does not have the option of shifting to militant antagonism toward the US because this would play directly into Peiping's hands and present the Chinese with a victory of unprecedented magnitude in the protracted Sino-Soviet duel.

These considerations constitute a strong incentive for continuing a policy of limited risk and for avoiding actions which would make it more difficult to control the extent of Soviet involvement. Moscow's public silence on the destruction of two US aircraft by Soviet-manned surface-to-air missiles in late July reflects the desire to avoid an open military confrontation with the US. This incident, however reflects the extent to which Soviet military assistance to Hanoi and military developments beyond Moscow's control have obliged Soviet leaders to accept the risks of greater involvement.

The policy of limited risk, however, will come under increasing pressures as US commitments in South Vietnam grow and as North Vietnam's appeals for greater assistance become more urgent. In this tight situation, the Soviet Union will continue and possibly expand its military support for the Hanoi regime. At the same time, however, the Soviet leaders apparently see no choice but to persist in their present efforts to block further military escalation, to stimulate growing international resistance to US policy, and to hold the door open for further initiatives to bring the conflict to the conference table. They probably anticipate that both the US and North Vietnam, in time, will be obliged to make further adjustments in their positions which will eventually open the way for cease-fire talks. From the Soviet standpoint, the most favorable break in the present impasse, apart from a major US retreat which they do not expect, would be one in which Hanoi is compelled to dissociate itself from Peiping's hard line and to authorize Moscow to act as a mediator in arranging negotiations.

Despite Soviet condemnation of alleged US intentions to expand the war, the Soviet leaders appear to have a realistic appreciation of the limited objectives of American policy. Soviet officials have acknowledged privately that the US does not desire an expansion of the conflict and that it would like to find a way out through negotiations. Moscow continues to draw attention to common Soviet and US strategic interests in preventing the spread of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.

Although the Soviet leaders have made it clear that they can take no initiatives toward negotiations until the North Vietnamese are ready, they probably believe that the time may come when they can afford to defy Peiping. In the meantime, the Russians are keeping open their contacts with all interested governments and reaffirming their desire to improve US-Soviet relations in order to proceed with urgent tasks of domestic reform and growth.

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