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MEMORANDUM FOR: *Jan* 

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29 July 1968

NORTH VIETNAMESE INTENTIONS

Summary

Recent Communist moves suggest more flexibility in North Vietnam's negotiating position than has been evident in the past. Hanoi may be preparing for a negotiated settlement which stops short of full Communist control, but which assures them opportunities to obtain a dominant role for the Communists in South Vietnam.

Nevertheless, in the absence of substantial US concessions, we do not believe that the Communists are yet prepared to agree to measures restricting their future military actions. The current military lull may have been designed in part for political effect, but it also is being used to prepare for another round of Communist attacks.

If the Communists are prepared to scale down their demands for a settlement, they are unlikely to give any clear indication of this until the results of further military efforts are known.

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Discussion

1. More than a year ago the Communists set out on an intensive military/political offensive aimed at creating conditions in the United States and in South Vietnam favorable to a negotiated political settlement in late 1968 or early next year. Whatever the specific terms of such a settlement, they had hoped to achieve a solution which gave them a dominant position in South Vietnam, or at least clear opportunities to achieve such a position over time.

2. The growth in anti-war sentiment in the US, the situation in South Vietnam after Tet, and President Johnson's 31 March speech encouraged Hanoi to believe its strategy was working. The North Vietnamese came to Paris to exploit this situation. During the first month they matched a hardline political stance with stepped up military pressures in South Vietnam. They expected to obtain a full bombing halt without committing themselves to measures of restraint. When this failed, they modified their tactics and made several moves designed to create conditions more favorable to US concessions.

3. Le Duc Tho's arrival in Paris on 3 June marked the beginning of the shift. As a result of Tho's conversations in Moscow, Premier Kosygin sent his private letter to President Johnson and the Soviets assumed a more active role both in Paris and Washington.

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4. The North Vietnamese are still concentrated on the bombing issue. The Soviets have implied strongly that Hanoi

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is flexible on handling the matter, [REDACTED]

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5. [REDACTED] in mid-June, Communist military activity in South Vietnam was cut back sharply. Communist units needed a respite both to refurbish and to work on growing problems of morale and discipline. This may have been the primary factor in causing the lull. But more than seven weeks of unusually light enemy activity during a period when Hanoi has been trying to induce US concessions also suggests that the Communists have limited combat operations in order to assist their current political tactics.

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6. Hanoi's decision to release three more American pilots was another maneuver to improve the prospects for US concessions. [REDACTED]

they contrasted the release with alleged US "intensification" of the war. Hanoi wants the US to respond, at least with some reduction in US military operations. The delay in the pilots' return may be intended to underscore this point.

7. Finally, a North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry memorandum on 17 July formally modified the condition that a settlement should be "in accordance with the program" of the Liberation Front. Despite attempts to obscure the point since then, Hanoi has softened the single feature of its basic position which the US considered most objectionable.

8. Hanoi is sustained by a conviction that peace sentiment in South Vietnam and the United States, potential discord between Washington and Saigon, and a mix of military

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and political pressures will open the way for a settlement acceptable to the Communists.

9. If, as seems evident, the Communists are hoping for a relatively early end to the war, they now face something of a dilemma. They have failed to "collapse" the GVN or to win the anticipated concessions from the US. If they launch another major offensive, they could have no certainty of making major gains. The military cost might be disproportionate, and the offensive might provoke a re-escalation of the bombing. Yet without further military pressures, Hanoi may doubt its ability to gain whatever concessions it considers essential.

10. If US concessions are not forthcoming, the Communists almost certainly will again try to force the issue. Preparations for another major Communist military effort in South Vietnam have been under way for over a month. Its timing will depend in part on purely military factors and in part on Hanoi's judgment of how best to exploit the political situations in the US and in South Vietnam. A firm decision on when and how to conduct this next round may not have been made yet.

11. Meanwhile, Hanoi will continue pressing for a unilateral US concession on the bombing issue. There is no convincing evidence that Hanoi is ready to make any meaningful concessions in return or to tie itself to specific measures of restraint in order to achieve this. Some further gestures or inducements short of such substantial concessions, however, may appear over the next few weeks.

12. A more likely time for Hanoi to engage in meaningful bargaining would be later this fall either during or after the next military effort. The next effort is likely, in fact, to be followed by new attempts to extract the concessions the Communists expect on the bombing issue. At that point they may be ready for serious discussion of the two-phase approach to solving the bombing/reciprocity problem.

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Hanoi has been noncommittal so far, but Soviet lobbying in favor of this approach suggests the Communists believe it is a formula which can be used to satisfy minimum US requirements for "restraint."

13. Hanoi probably expects to follow some version of the two-phase approach eventually, but it is in no hurry to clarify its position on second phase steps. The Communists believe time is working to their advantage. They hope that rising election pressures on the Johnson administration will soon provide better opportunities for dealing with these issues.

14. Hanoi is unlikely to agree to measures which will restrict its future military actions--such as restoration of the DMZ--unless it is reasonably certain that the US is willing to go all the way toward a settlement acceptable to the Communists. Thus, the North Vietnamese want to see the political as well as the military provisions on the two-phase package in order to have some idea of broad US terms for a settlement.

15. Hanoi's outline for such a settlement remains murky. It wants, of course, a dominant role for the Communists in a postwar South Vietnam. The Communists will continue to focus on this goal, and they know the Paris talks might serve them better if they could get around the bombing issue and into discussions of crucial political matters where they believe the GVN is vulnerable.

16. But there probably is growing recognition in Hanoi that nothing the Communists can do is likely to win a dominant role for them in the near future, and that even the US elections offer little hope that Washington will accept such a settlement. If events strengthen this view, Hanoi may be prepared to move toward a negotiated settlement which stops short of full Communist control,

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17. There are several signs that Hanoi is preparing for greater emphasis on political tactics in the struggle for control in South Vietnam. The downgrading of the Front, the creation of the peace Alliance concept, and strenuous efforts to organize new, local administrative structures in Communist-controlled areas of the south all point in this direction.

18. Recent information confirms that North Vietnamese Politburo member Pham Hung is now chief of the Communist apparatus in South Vietnam. Unlike his predecessor, Hung is not primarily a military man. His background during the past ten years has been mainly in internal party and government affairs in North Vietnam. After the 1954 Geneva Agreements, he had a primary role in preparing the Communists in the south for a political takeover via the elections scheduled for 1956. His presence in South Vietnam during recent months suggests that Hanoi is again looking toward such a period.

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29 July 1968

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3. More than a year ago the Communists set out on an intensive military/political offensive aimed at creating conditions in the United States and in South Vietnam favorable to a negotiated political settlement in late 1968 or early next year. Whatever the specific terms of such a settlement, they hoped to achieve a solution which gave them a dominant position in South Vietnam, or at least clear opportunities to achieve such a position over time.

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they contrasted the release with alleged US "intensification" of the war. The message is clear: Hanoi wants the US to respond, not necessarily with a full bombing halt, but at least with some reduction in US military operations. The delay in the pilots' return may be intended to underscore this point.

9. Finally, a North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry memorandum on 17 July formally modified the condition that a settlement should be "in accordance with the program" of the Liberation Front. Despite attempts to obscure the point since then, Hanoi has withdrawn the single feature of its basic position which the US considered most objectionable.

North Vietnamese Motives and Objectives

10. Hanoi is sustained by a conviction that peace sentiment in South Vietnam and the United States, potential discord between Washington and Saigon, and a mix of military and political pressures will open the way for a settlement acceptable to the Communists.

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in order to achieve this. Short of such a US move, some further gestures or inducements may appear over the next few weeks.

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SUBJECT: HANOI'S INTENTIONS AND THE CURRENT LULL IN THE FIGHTING

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1. We see no convincing evidence that Hanoi has changed its immediate or longer term objectives in South Vietnam or that it plans to de-emphasize the "fight" aspect of its "fight-talk" strategy in attempting to attain its objectives.

2. The present lull in the fighting is consistent with past Communist tactics and is all the more necessary at this time in view of the extra-ordinary combat losses sustained since Tet and the need to improve morale and discipline, particularly among officers who had begun to doubt the wisdom of incurring heavy losses without obvious effect on US/GVN will and capabilities. Cessation of the rocket attacks on Saigon resulted from Hanoi's realization that such attacks were counterproductive internationally and in Saigon itself, as well as from the fact that US/ARVN countermeasures were making these attacks difficult to sustain.

3. All military indications point to a renewal of Communist military pressures over the next month or two. Additional units have been moved into III Corps to replace losses and to add to the possible weight of fresh attacks on Saigon. One division which withdrew into North Vietnam in June is already returning through the DMZ to northeastern I Corps. Other units are busy receiving replacements, supplies, and political re-indoctrination.

5. No doubt the Communists would like to accomplish the destruction or "collapse" of the GVN, the creation of a new "neutral" coalition government in Saigon based on the Alliance for Peace, and the withdrawal of the US from South Vietnam, without further fighting and by negotiations. This is what they hoped to accomplish when they went to Paris and most of their moves since that time have been directed to that end. They have brought the

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Russians in on the act, modified POINT 3 with respect to the role of NLF, and in various other ways attempted to encourage the US to ignore the GVN and to accept a "graceful" exit from South Vietnam. But they have offered nothing which would in any way compromise their freedom of action, permit any suggestion to their own forces that a ~~political~~ political solution could be obtained without further fighting, or hold out any real promise^{of} recognizing that the GVN could be allowed to exist.

6. We have not, in the past, ruled out the possibility that Hanoi would at some point be prepared to make meaningful concessions in order to end the bombing and the fighting and to gain a political settlement in Vietnam. The cumulative pressures of the war on the Communists, which we have previously noted, have probably been intensified by the heavy losses of the past six months and by the simple passage of time. There are also the uncertainties of the situation in China and ^{the} unwelcome prospect of becoming more vulnerable to Chinese pressures over the longer run if Vietnamese society is bled further in a protracted struggle.

7. Hanoi is no doubt at the moment in somewhat of a dilemma as to its next step. It has failed by military and psychological pressures to collapse the GVN or to win the anticipated concessions from the US. In the process it has suffered fearful casualties and it has not gained stronger international backing. If it risks another major offensive, there can be no guarantee of success, and another major failure could have profoundly adverse effects on the morale of the Viet Cong and the northern troops and people. Yet without military pressure, Hanoi must view the chances of progress toward its goals as ~~problematic~~ ^{problematic}.

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8. Its sustaining hope at this point remains the possibility of exploiting peace sentiment in South Vietnam and the US, in sowing discord between Washington and Saigon, and mixing military pressures and political moves in such a way as to cause the free world effort in South Vietnam to unravel. Thus, we believe that despite the risks involved, Hanoi will continue to stall in Paris while preparing for additional military action. The timing of this action will depend in part on purely military factors, and in part on Hanoi's view of how best to exploit the political situation in the US and South Vietnam. But we do not foresee a prolonged military respite extending through the end of the year, in any event, This would give US/ARVN too much time to move further into the countryside, to penetrate Communist base areas, and to create a climate of optimism and success. It would also permit the GVN to consolidate its administration in secure areas, and to recover from the stresses and strains of the past 6 months.

9. ~~The Hanoi~~ ^(in Paris) Hanoi's representative has shown "interest" in US proposals for a cessation of the bombing, followed soon by re-establishment of the DMZ and other measures of military restraint. We think that Hanoi will only move down this path when it is convinced that it can no longer afford to contemplate an intense military struggle and when it judges that ~~neither~~ neither Saigon or Washington can be brought, by one means or another, to make concessions which assure a dominant role for the Communists in a post-war South Vietnam. We do not believe that time has yet arrived.