

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

CIA/SAVA / INTS 486168/72

6 May 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: SOVIET, CHINESE, FREE WORLD REACTIONS TO A US ATTEMPT
TO DENY SEA ACCESS TO NORTH VIETNAM

Assumption: The measures that the US might take in an attempt to deny sea-borne imports to North Vietnam could include (a) mining the approaches to ports; (b) bombing of ports to destroy unloading and storage facilities; (c) naval blockade.

1. These measures vary in the sharpness of confrontation they would produce and therefore in the degree of tension and risk which might result. The reactions of the various parties would also vary accordingly.

2. For the Soviets and Chinese, the key questions posed would be the following:

- (a) Would Hanoi's capacity to carry on its war effort be significantly reduced?
- (b) Would the US actions be sustained for a considerable period?
- (c) Would these portend other US escalatory steps?

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

~~TOP SECRET~~

- (d) Would the countermeasures which might be envisioned carry tolerable risks and be sufficient to uphold the prestige of the Communist powers?

3. It is conceivable, but we judge extremely unlikely, that Moscow and Peking or one of them would respond to the US show of determination by moving to place Hanoi under genuine pressure to reach a compromise settlement. While neither of the Communist great powers has a vital interest in the success of Hanoi's campaign in South Vietnam, they almost certainly could not agree on this course and each would fear to act unilaterally because of reactions anticipated in other Communist states and parties. Moreover, neither would wish, because of concern for its own standing as a great power, to bear the onus of yielding obviously under US pressure.

4. Thus we believe that Moscow and Peking would respond initially by joint measures to increase supplies to Hanoi via China's land routes. The capacity of the land routes from China into North Vietnam is adequate to supply Hanoi's needs over an indefinite period, and we have no doubt that the Soviets and Chinese could agree to cooperate in carrying out supply by these routes if they judged that necessary to sustain Hanoi. Finally, the ability to keep Hanoi going by land supply would give time to consider other measures, and the broader costs and risks which might emerge more clearly as the crisis developed.

~~TOP SECRET~~

USSR Reactions

5. Having decided on these measures to continue support for Hanoi, the Soviets would be primarily concerned to contain the crisis, and to limit the costs to Soviet-American relations generally.

Nevertheless, they would consider that their standing as a great power had been directly challenged and would want to act to uphold their prestige.

6. On the political level, Moscow would feel that it had no choice but to react sharply. The machinery of propaganda would be employed with high intensity in order to maximize the pressure of world and domestic US opinion against the US administration. Unless the US desisted and the crisis seemed on the way to resolution within a few days or so, the effect would be to make the May Summit impossible. The Soviets would almost certainly move to cancel it. This step might be delayed somewhat if the US measures were limited to mining, which would pose a less direct challenge to the USSR, but would come in any case if the US persisted.

7. The Soviets would be aware that the damage to the climate of Soviet-American relations generally -- to the SALT agreement, to trade prospects, and to détente in Europe -- would be severe. But we believe

~~TOP SECRET~~

that the Kremlin consensus would come down on the side of paying this price rather than seeming to bow under US pressure. In doing so, there would probably be the intention to return to present lines of policy toward the US as soon as circumstances permitted.

8. There would remain the question of what specific steps the USSR should take to counter the US moves. While considering these, the Soviets would probably order their ships out of North Vietnamese waters. If the US limited itself to mining North Vietnam's sea approaches, the Soviets would probably give Hanoi technical assistance in sweeping operations. To bombing attacks on ports they would reply with additional measures to strengthen North Vietnam's air defenses, but would probably not take overt measures such as sending Soviet aircraft and crews. (Sinking of Soviet ships during such attacks would obviously place the Soviets under great pressure to react more sharply.) A blockade would pose a more direct challenge than bombing or mining. We believe that the Soviets would judge that the risks of an attempt to defy a blockade would be too great, and would avoid doing so. Before the world, they would make a virtue of their restraint and point to their continuing support to Hanoi in other ways.

9. Throughout, the Soviets would be concerned to *show* an adequate response in support of North Vietnam and in defense of their

~~TOP SECRET~~

own prestige. They would be equally concerned to keep the crisis under control and to limit its damage to their wider interests, but would find this increasingly difficult if the crisis was prolonged. They would count heavily on mounting pressures on the US administration at home and abroad to deter further escalation and to force Washington to desist eventually. And they would be prepared at a suitable moment to sponsor a new formula for resumption of negotiations, though still not on terms which Hanoi would judge prejudicial to its interests.

Chinese Reactions

10. Peking would see the US move as more directly challenging to the USSR than to China. Indeed, for the Chinese, the situation would hold some promise of political gain as Soviet-US relations came under heavy strain, and as the prospective shift to land routes emphasized China's status as "the great rear area of the Indochinese revolution".

11. But the Chinese would have to do more than contemplate their potential gains. They would feel compelled to demonstrate to Hanoi -- and to the world -- their continued devotion to the North Vietnamese cause and their outrage at US actions. This could probably be accomplished primarily by words and diplomatic gestures. China

~~TOP SECRET~~

would not necessarily have to take the sort of action that might seriously risk future progress in the rapprochement with Washington. Peking would certainly cooperate fully with North Vietnamese and Soviet efforts to redirect shipments -- including, probably, permitting the use of South China ports for offloading Soviet vessels.

12. Inherent in the proposed US action, nonetheless, would be some real problems for the Chinese. Like Moscow and Hanoi, Peking would probably foresee the possibility of further US action against North Vietnamese supply lines if the attempt to deny sea access failed to achieve important US purposes within a few weeks or months. Thus, China must think ahead to a time when US bombing might focus on Hanoi's rail and road links to China. Such action, while not posing any direct challenge to China (so long as the bombs do not fall on Chinese soil), would bring Peking's role in the war into greater prominence and raise questions concerning the course of Sino-American relations.* In Peking itself, Premier Chou En-lai's policies vis-à-vis the US might become the subject of high-level debate with Chou -- who asserts that the US is on the way out of Asia -- on the defensive. In prudence, he might well decide to act sooner rather than later to demonstrate his displeasure with the US.

* *The problem would be exacerbated if Peking felt compelled to deploy PLA engineer, construction, and AAA units into the Tonkin region -- as in 1966-1968 -- to assist North Vietnam's logistic effort.*

~~TOP SECRET~~

13. Whatever the strength of China's desires to limit the conflict in Indochina, we see no evidence that Peking is prepared to undermine Hanoi's basic capacities or to pressure the North Vietnamese in the direction of major concessions. We doubt that the proposed US action could alter Peking's posture in this respect.

Non-Communist Reaction

14. Predominant reaction in the non-Communist world would be that the US move was an ill-advised escalation of a struggle which has ceased to be worth additional costs and risks. In Western Europe and Japan this sentiment would no doubt be louder and clearer in the public media and among articulate citizen groups than in official circles. But most of these governments, though quite aware of the North Vietnamese provocation and sympathetic to the US in the dilemma posed, would fear that the US was embarking on a course of questionable outcome in which the political price and dangers outweighed the possible benefits. This reaction would be more pronounced than would have been the case two or three years ago because time has raised hopes -- among US friends and others alike -- that the US was on the way to extricating itself.

~~TOP SECRET~~

15. This kind of response would not be confined to those parties or governments which are on record with disapproval or disbelief in the US war effort in Vietnam; it would also be reflected in the attitudes of those who have been most sympathetic -- who have hoped or believed that through gradual withdrawal and the Vietnamization approach, the US had found a tolerable prospect for ending its role in the war. Our friends would be particularly concerned that the move presaged a period of high tensions between the super-powers, one which promised, at worst great danger, and at best great uncertainties -- e.g., an end to the Sino-US détente, to the prospect of a SALT agreement, developments approved by most US allies. So far as distinctions can be made in this respect, the West European allies would be most apprehensive about adverse effects on US-Soviet relations; Japan about the effects on China and the latter's policy toward both the US and Japan.

16. Certain lesser US allies in Asia would react differently than those just discussed. Thailand and South Korea, for example, being involved in the war and still having hopes of some kind of satisfactory outcome, would probably find the US move an appropriate response to North Vietnam's invasion and would hope that it proved effective. If it did not, they would probably favor even more drastic

~~TOP SECRET~~

measures. But even these "pro" responses would be tempered by some apprehensive ambivalence: on the one hand, they would derive comfort from indications of US readiness to act forcefully in Asia; on the other hand, mindful of the history of the war and of US domestic war weariness, they would fear that if this US effort failed to achieve results, the eventual upshot would be greater American disillusionment and readiness to cut commitments in Asia -- including commitments to themselves.

17. It can be argued that certain other non-Communist states who look to the US would be heartened by this demonstration of resolve. And it is possible that, for example, Israel or Pakistan might derive a certain comfort of this sort. On the whole, however, such reactions would probably be quite transitory, unless the operation proved dramatically successful. And in the meantime, local adversaries of such states (e.g., Egypt and India) would be more disposed to re-insure further with the Soviets.