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Mandatory Review

Case # NLJ 92-37a

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5 January 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Communist Reactions to Certain US Military Operations in Vietnam

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. How would the Communists react to US ground force operations in the northern portion of the DMZ or in immediately adjacent territory of North Vietnam? We think the primary factor influencing their reactions would be not so much the immediate effect of the US actions, but rather what they believed these actions conveyed as to eventual US intentions. Would they estimate that the US was seeking only to neutralize Communist bases and sanctuaries in border areas? Or would they judge that the US was making the first moves toward a massive invasion of North Vietnam and thus to a major change in the war? In attempting to decipher US intentions, the Communists would

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take into account not only the nature and scope of the US operations north of the 17th parallel, but also any significant movement or new deployment of US forces in SVN, and US operations in other areas (e.g., Laos and Cambodia). Obviously they would also consider what the US said about its objectives, but would be little inclined to take these statements at face value.

2. Of the three Communist powers, Hanoi would probably take the most somber view of the US action. Hanoi almost certainly fears that the US will progressively increase military pressures on North Vietnam and gradually extend its objectives to include destruction of the regime. US operations of appreciable size and scope in the northern DMZ, and particularly an extension of such operations further into North Vietnamese territory, would greatly reinforce such fears. Peking would be inclined to share Hanoi's apprehensions. As for the Soviets, they would probably not discard their estimate that US intentions were less far reaching than Hanoi and Peking feared, but their confidence in such a judgment would be weakened.

3. An important aspect of the situation would be the reaction of public opinion in the United States and the non-Communist world

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generally. Small-scale operations confined to the northern DMZ would arouse some concern and criticism. But if US ground forces went beyond the DMZ further into North Vietnam, in numbers great enough to be appreciable, there would be outbursts of disapproval and alarm in most of the non-Communist world. Most of the apprehension would be over the increased prospects of a Sino-US war. The Communists, of course, would try to exploit such sentiment. Indeed, they might anticipate that international reaction would be an important factor restraining the US from any large-scale move into North Vietnamese territory.

4. Based on these factors, the Communists would determine their countermeasures. These would include not only immediate tactical moves to cope with the new tactical situation, but also longer-term preparations to deal with possible future US actions. Hanoi would have to consider not only new deployments of its own forces but whether the time had come to request more extensive help from other Communist countries, including the introduction of Chinese ground combat forces into North Vietnam in some numbers.

5. At the same time, the progress of the war to a new level might cause the North Vietnamese leaders to believe their best course was to make some move toward peace. On the whole,

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however, we think it more likely that Hanoi would refuse to enter negotiations under these circumstances and would continue fighting. The following paragraphs proceed on the assumption that this would be the North Vietnamese decision.

II. SPECIFIC RESPONSES

The North Vietnamese Position

6. In recent months, the North Vietnamese leaders have indicated increased concern over the possibility that the US will expand ground actions into North Vietnam. In September, General Giap publicly speculated on this and warned that the US would be invading a member of the "socialist camp." Recently the North Vietnamese Chief of Staff claimed that the US was considering "new attacks against the northern part of the demilitarized zone. . ." If, as these statements suggest, the North Vietnamese leaders have given serious thought to a US "invasion," they presumably have roughed out their own counteractions, and, as Giap implies, the expected contributions from the "socialist camp."

7. The North Vietnamese would, of course, contest any US operation in the DMZ, regardless of its size. They have fairly

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large forces in this general area, and they would try to inflict as much punishment as possible on the US, hoping thereby to deter any further operations. As long as the operations were on a fairly small scale and remained within the DMZ, Hanoi would probably not go much beyond a tactical response. Communist forces in South Vietnam would try to take advantage of whatever opportunities were created by a thinning out of US forces for the DMZ operations.

8. It is possible that Hanoi might try to relieve the pressures on the DMZ by increased military action in Laos. The North Vietnamese leaders might calculate that limited moves either in the panhandle or northern provinces would deter the US from plans to enlarge the DMZ operations. This seems unlikely, however. Hanoi would probably judge that military escalation in Laos would only hasten larger US actions against North Vietnam. And it would want to conserve its forces against the threat of a major US invasion.

9. If US operations in the DMZ, and especially in North Vietnamese territory immediately adjacent, were conducted on a fairly large scale, Hanoi would take some new steps to deter

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the US. More forces would be moved southward into the panhandle of North Vietnam. Propaganda denunciations and threats would be amplified. Hanoi would urge Moscow and Peking to lend their voices to such a campaign. If US operations were extended further north in the panhandle, Hanoi would probably request Peking to bring Chinese combat troops into the northern parts of North Vietnam (a) as a further deterrent and (b) to release North Vietnamese troops for deployment to the coastal areas and the DMZ.

Peking's Reaction

10. The confused internal situation makes Chinese intentions difficult to assess, but we believe the Chinese remain basically cautious about risking a military confrontation with the US. Small scale US operations in the DMZ or even slightly beyond probably would not cause any change in Chinese policy. Peking would, of course, join in the propaganda chorus, and probably would be quicker than Moscow to make some demonstrative response to an appeal from Hanoi.

11. If US operations became progressively larger and extended further into North Vietnam, Peking would become increasingly concerned that they indicated a growing threat

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to the existence of the Hanoi regime. China would want to deter further US actions while still avoiding a direct confrontation with the US. It would probably calculate that the best means toward these ends would be to give firm indications that it was prepared at some point to fight. Appearing to hesitate or equivocate might seem to Peking to be in the long run a more dangerous course. Accordingly, we think that the Chinese leaders would, if requested by Hanoi, send ground combat forces into North Vietnam. But these troops would be highly unlikely to move far enough south to engage US forces as long as Peking felt that North Vietnamese forces were still capable of containing the US threat.

12. The Chinese would probably not attempt a military diversion elsewhere around China's periphery. However, a larger Chinese involvement in North Vietnam would probably be attended by other military movements within China -- precautionary from Peking's point of view. International tensions would greatly increase, and the US could never be certain that Chinese military moves did not have more ominous implications than mere deterrence.

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13. As long as the US actions remained fairly limited in size, we think Soviet reactions would be confined to material and political support for Hanoi. To help allay Hanoi's increased apprehension of a major US invasion, Soviet support would probably include those kinds of weapons which could strengthen Hanoi's capability to deal with such a threat. The Soviets might believe that providing "volunteers" to man some of these weapons would have some deterrent value on the US. The Soviets would also try to check further US action by warnings and perhaps a demonstrative political protest against the US (e.g., terminating certain negotiations or contacts).

14. If US military operations expanded further into North Vietnam and on a fairly large scale, the Soviets would anticipate a critical turning point in the war. They would fear that the US actions presaged a direct threat to Hanoi's existence and they would foresee that the Chinese presence and influence in North Vietnam would vastly increase. They would feel compelled to become much more active in trying to forestall such developments.

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15. For one thing, the Soviets would probably feel that they had to speak more forthrightly to Hanoi, pointing out that unless it made some move toward peace it faced either a defeat by the US or overwhelming dependence on China. But they recognize that their ability to influence Hanoi is limited, especially since they are almost certainly not prepared to pay the political costs of withholding aid, or even of making serious threats to do so.

16. At the same time, the Soviets would certainly consider how they might put direct pressure on the US to force it to back down in Vietnam. They could, for example, introduce at least a limited number of their own combat units into North Vietnam, or provoke a diversionary crisis elsewhere. We think it highly unlikely that they would risk a major military clash with the US in Vietnam, where their forces would be at a great disadvantage and dependent on long lines of communication. As for provoking a major crisis with the US in some other area, say in Berlin, this would, in our view, constitute more of a risk than the Soviets would be disposed to run for the sake of their interests in Vietnam. We think that the USSR, as a matter of general policy, would avoid moves which would have the effect of converting the Vietnamese crisis into a world-wide showdown with the US.

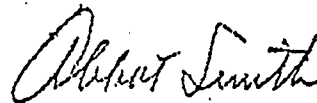
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17. Short of such extreme reactions, however, the Soviets would almost certainly make some limited moves, perhaps even in Berlin, which would be intended to create the impression that a situation of great danger was developing. They would probably warn the US with considerable vigor and undertake some demonstrative political act such as breaking off the Geneva disarmament negotiations or recalling the Soviet Ambassador. In short, US-Soviet tensions would be greatly heightened.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



ABBOT SMITH
Chairman

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