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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

7 November 1961

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-4-61: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN
US ACTIONS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

SCOPE

The purpose of this estimate is to assess Communist (Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese) reactions and, where significant, non-Communist reactions to certain US military actions intended to assist the Government of Vietnam cope with the Communist threat.*

* Other National Intelligence Estimates pertinent to this problem are SNIE 10-2-61, "Likelihood of Major Communist Military Intervention in Mainland Southeast Asia," dated 27 June 1961; SNIE 58-2-61, "Probable Reactions to Certain Courses of Action Concerning Laos," dated 5 July 1961; NIE 14.3/53061, "Prospects for North and South Vietnam," dated 15 August 1961; and SNIE 53-2-61, "Bloc Support of the Communist Effort Against the Government of Vietnam," dated 5 October 1961; SNIE 10-3-61, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain SEATO Undertakings in South Vietnam," dated 10 October 1961.

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The courses of action here considered were given to the intelligence community for the purposes of this estimate and were not intended to represent the full range of possible courses of action. The given courses of action are:

A. The introduction of a US airlift into and within South Vietnam, increased logistics support, and an increase in MAAG strength to provide US advisers down to battalion level;

B. The introduction into South Vietnam of a US force of about 8,000-10,000 troops, mostly engineers with some combat support, in response to an appeal from President Diem for assistance in flood relief;

C. The introduction into the area of a US combat force of 25,000 to 40,000 to engage with South Vietnamese forces in ground, air, and naval operations against the Viet Cong; and

D. An announcement by the US of its determination to hold South Vietnam and a warning, either private or public, that North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong must cease or the US would launch air attacks against North Vietnam. This action would be taken in conjunction with Course A, B, or C.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The interests of the Soviet Union, Communist China, and Communist North Vietnam overlap at many points but they vary considerably in intensity and urgency. To Hanoi, the ouster of President Diem and the reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule are basic objectives. Both objectives were accorded high priority at the North Vietnamese Communist Party Congress in 1960. The announcement of these objectives ended a preparatory phase and marked the beginning of a sharp increase in Viet Cong guerrilla, subversive, and political warfare. During the past year, North Vietnam has made a substantial investment in the campaign against Diem, and Hanoi is probably determined to press for an early victory in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese leaders are convinced that they defeated the French in the Indochina War but were deprived of the fruits of their victory at the conference table in 1954-1955. Recent events in Laos have encouraged the North Vietnamese leaders and given them increased confidence in their "national liberation" tactics. They almost certainly

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believe that, by those tactics, they can in time upset the Diem government and take over South Vietnam. They probably believe that they could, provided that the war would be confined within the boundaries of South Vietnam, render ineffective a level of US military support to South Vietnam substantially in excess of that postulated in Course C.

2. Chinese Communist interests are more directly involved in the Indochina states than are those of the USSR. Peiping's leaders appear impatient for concrete Communist advances, particularly in areas of substantial US interest. Moreover, Communist China would regard any increase in the US commitment in South Vietnam, and in particular any introduction of US troops into the area, as a serious challenge. The USSR, while sharing the desire of North Vietnam and Communist China to bring South Vietnam into the Communist Bloc, almost certainly does not regard this as justifying the assumption of serious risk.

3. Thus, we believe that the USSR would be inclined to a less militant response than Communist China or North Vietnam to any of the given US courses of action except possibly in the case of Course D. Moscow would seek to maintain control of the situation and to restrain both Peiping and Hanoi from any responses

likely, in Moscow's view, to run serious risk of expanded hostilities and the involvement of Soviet forces. The Soviet leaders would probably believe that, while the US commitment under Course A, B, or C would temporarily strengthen South Vietnam, it would only slow down, not reverse, the trends favoring the Communists in that country. Thus they would probably seek to avoid substantial escalation of the fighting.

4. The Chinese, in our view, would be much more sensitive than the Soviets to the arrival of US forces in South Vietnam. They also place a higher priority upon the early victory of the Communist cause in Southeast Asia, and would be considerably less concerned about the possible impact on Communist interests in Europe. While they are almost certainly more sensitive to the consequences of general war than some of their more radical statements indicate, their concern over this possibility does appear to be less acute than that of their Soviet partner. They would probably be more inclined than the Soviets to believe that the US would not undertake a further escalation. Thus we believe that they would argue for a rapid buildup of local Communist capabilities and the vigorous engagement of US forces.

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5. Communist China is presently faced with serious internal problems: the aftermath of a period of gross economic mismanagement; three successive bad harvests; and a substantial disruption of the economic development plan. Moreover, tension in relations with the USSR has reached a new high. Nevertheless, these developments are not likely to substantially alter Communist China's attitudes toward military commitment in Southeast Asia.

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6. If the Chinese and the Soviets reacted in these ways, some further strain would be placed upon Sino-Soviet relations, already aggravated by Khrushchev's indirect but strong attacks at the XXII Congress in Moscow. The Soviets would not wish to give Peiping additional reasons to charge them with insufficient militancy and boldness. Also they would be reluctant to back away from Khrushchev's oft-repeated promise of support for wars of "national liberation." At the same time the Soviets are deeply dubious of Chinese prudence and would be reluctant to give them a free rein. These strains would be acutely felt by the North Vietnamese, who have thus far attempted to avoid aggravating either side and preserve for themselves a maximum freedom of maneuver.

II. PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS

7. In response to either Course A, B, or C the Bloc would initiate a major political and propaganda campaign in the UN and worldwide to highlight and condemn the US action and to brand the US as an aggressor. The US would be denounced for violating the 1954 Geneva Agreements and torpedoing the present Geneva Conference on Laos. The intensity of this campaign would increase as the US

involvement increased. Its purpose would be to generate international pressure to force a US withdrawal. The Bloc, particularly the USSR, would consider that substantial political and propaganda gains could be made from exploiting non-Communist criticism of these actions.

8. It is likely that Courses C and D in particular would lead to widespread demands for a conference -- for "negotiations" to diminish the tensions and "settle" the crisis. The Communist powers, and particularly the USSR, would almost certainly promote this demand, and signify their willingness to negotiate. They would do so in the conviction that such a procedure would provide a period of time in which they could pursue their efforts in South Vietnam, perhaps on a somewhat diminished scale, but still with fair success and lessened risk. And they would probably also calculate that, conditions being what they are in the area, almost any form of negotiated settlement would leave them with substantial opportunities to continue the "liberation" struggle.

Course A. The introduction of a US airlift into and within South Vietnam, increased logistics support, and an increase in MAAG strength to provide US advisers down to battalion level.

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9. We do not believe that this course of action would evoke a significant military response by Moscow or Peiping. Hanoi would probably press forward with its Viet Cong campaign, infiltrating cadres and logistic support to South Vietnam through the mountain routes of eastern Laos, across the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, and by sea from North Vietnam. Additional regular North Vietnamese Army units probably would be infiltrated into South Vietnam and southern Laos. The Viet Cong would probably step up its exploitation of South Vietnam's weaknesses in the plateau areas of South Vietnam seeking to establish a logistics base from which larger scale (regimental level) operations could be mounted. The Communists probably would augment their efforts to build up the eastern part of south Laos as a major supply channel for the introduction of Bloc equipment into northern and central South Vietnam. US supply and communications lines would be harassed and the Communists would increase terrorist and sabotage attacks against US personnel and installations. In certain areas US aircraft would probably be subjected to antiaircraft fire. The Communist airlift would probably be expanded and extended to include airdrops and air-landing of supplies in South Vietnam as well as south Laos.

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Course B. The introduction into South Vietnam of a US force of about 8,000-10,000 troops, mostly engineers with some combat support, in response to an appeal from President Dien for assistance in flood relief.

10. The announcement that US troops were being sent to South Vietnam for purposes of flood relief would not be convincing to the Communist states or to non-Communist governments. This would be so even if the troops confined their activity strictly to flood relief work. Nevertheless, most governments would consider that the flood relief announcement provided opportunities for disengagement. However, later disengagement by the US would have serious effects in Southeast Asia.

11. Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi would regard this US course of action as a significant new indication of US intention to support the Dien government and to defend South Vietnam. However, they almost certainly would not respond by overtly committing regular North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist forces to a military attack against South Vietnam or Laos.

12. They would, nevertheless, probably build up their readiness posture in the general Southeast Asia area. The Bloc capitals would issue strong threats against the US to withdraw

its forces. The Communists would probably accept increased risk of exposure and introduce additional North Vietnamese forces, similar to those mentioned under Course A, into South Vietnam and southern Laos to stiffen Communist forces there and to protect communications routes. Within South Vietnam, Communist-directed operations would probably be intensified throughout the countryside. The US forces would probably be subjected to harassment and ambush, the intensity and scope of such action depending upon the extent to which the US forces were threatening Communist-controlled areas. The Chinese Communists would probably increase their ground and air forces in south China and would possibly introduce air units into North Vietnam.

Course C. The introduction into the area of a US combat force of 25,000-40,000 men to engage with the South Vietnamese forces in ground, air, and naval operations against the Viet Cong.

13. The three Communist governments would probably estimate that the Viet Cong, with increased support, could successfully harass the US troops, avoid major defeats, and continue to hold the initiative and to score victories in many areas of South Vietnam. At the same time, however, all three would recognize

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that this commitment had greatly increased the involvement of US prestige in the South Vietnamese case and was a strong indication that at a later stage the US might go further if necessary to prevent the defeat of that cause. The North Vietnamese and the Chinese Communists would view the military force as a threat to their interests in Southeast Asia and the reinforced US presence as a potential threat to their security. The objective of all three Communist powers would be to maintain Communist bases and strength in South Vietnam and, eventually, to terminate the US intervention. The Chinese and North Vietnamese Communists would probably be keener on the latter point since their interests are more directly involved. The Soviets would prefer to do it in a more gradual way, through attrition of US forces in the area and diplomatic-political pressures elsewhere.

14. Although an extreme military response might follow this US course of action, we believe it more likely that the Communist military reaction in South Vietnam would be a compromise -- somewhat stronger than the Soviets would wish but still limited enough to keep the risks under tolerable control. The USSR would almost certainly try to take the lead in supplying whatever outside military assistance was necessary, in order to maximize its

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control over the situation. The North Vietnamese would support this effort in order to ward off an increase in Chinese influence within their country. In any event we believe that such a compromise would be unstable, that the three partners would continue to argue among themselves, and that the subsequent development of the crisis might result in Peiping assuming a more independent role.

15. However, on balance we believe that the initial Communist reactions would be directed toward a holding operation in South Vietnam. In addition to an intensification of the types of Communist response we have estimated would ensue from the initiation of either Course A or B, we believe that Course C would evoke the following actions: strong and specific Soviet and Chinese Communist declarations of their intention to maintain the security of North Vietnam and sustain the "revolutionary struggle" in South Vietnam; and an increase in the scale of Viet Cong guerrilla efforts against the US forces; and possibly the introduction of Chinese Communist or Soviet air units into North Vietnam.

16. We believe that the Communists would have considerable confidence that these measures would in the long term render ineffective US armed assistance to South Vietnam. If, however, the action appeared to be seriously threatening the Communist Government in South Vietnam and establishing a strong military position in the country, the Communists would seriously consider providing more direct armed support. In these circumstances, the Communists might commit major North Vietnamese regular units in South Vietnam and Chinese Communist support units into North Vietnam, although they would recognize that this action would raise the risks of broadening the war. It is possible on the other hand that they would lower the tempo of military activity in South Vietnam with a view to raising it at another time or at another place in Southeast Asia.

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Course D. An announcement by the US of its determination to hold South Vietnam and a warning, either private or public, that North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong must cease or the US would launch air attacks against North Vietnam. This Course would be taken in conjunction with Course A, D, or C.

17. A specific warning of air attacks against North Vietnam, whether conveyed privately or publicly, would evoke very serious concern among all three Communist powers. A warning of air attacks on North Vietnam would be taken particularly seriously if it were issued in conjunction with the commitment of substantial US troop strength, as under Course C. Moscow and Peking would regard the defense of North Vietnam against such an attack as imperative. They would seek to forestall such an attack to prevent military damage to North Vietnam and also to avoid the risk of expanded hostilities. If the US warning were given privately, the Communist powers would probably feel that their interests could best be served by making public the warning and castigating it as a threat to world peace. They would probably see considerable advantage in this course and in bringing the case before the UN even if they did not believe that the US was prepared to make good on its threat.

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18. Moscow and Peking would probably announce their determination to defend the North Vietnam against attack and stress that any such action would carry the risk of general war. The Communist powers would probably also take certain military measures not only to make credible their position but also to provide for improved air defense of North Vietnam. These measures would probably include the stationing of Soviet and/or Chinese Communist aircraft and antiaircraft units in North Vietnam. It is also possible that a "North Vietnamese" Air Force, complete with jet fighters, might suddenly be unveiled. The Soviet leaders would probably calculate that they could, by such political and military measures, generate sufficient worldwide pressures to dissuade the US from its threat, particularly if it could be depicted as a threat to use nuclear weapons. While not desiring to precipitate a major military incident, the USSR and Communist China would be determined to avoid conducting themselves in such a manner as to let the US conclude that it had found a way to stop Communist support of "National liberation" movements.

19. If the US did subject North Vietnam to air attacks, the USSR and Communist China would commit air power to defend North Vietnam. They would probably undertake retaliatory attacks against targets in South Vietnam and against the bases or carriers from

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which the attacks on North Vietnam had been launched. These retaliatory attacks would probably be made by a "North Vietnamese" Air Force which would, in fact, be a mixed force. Similarly, a nuclear attack by the US would probably elicit some nuclear response.

20. The postulated courses of US action in South Vietnam would have an impact upon Communist tactics in Laos. The Communists would probably interpret the US action (except possibly Course A) as evidence of a stiffening US attitude in Southeast Asia. They would probably drag their foot in the negotiations at Geneva and step up their efforts to consolidate and expand their military and political position in Laos.

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III. NON-COMMUNIST REACTIONS

21. South Vietnam. Most South Vietnamese would strongly welcome Courses A or B. In view of the seriousness of the security situation and its adverse impact on national morale, we do not believe that a substantial increase in the number of Americans in Vietnam would generate any appreciable concern that the country was coming under US domination. While supporting the introduction of larger numbers of troops such as envisaged under Course C, the South Vietnamese Government would probably desire that they be used, at least initially, as a static defense force freeing South Vietnamese military units for combat operations. The introduction of such a US force might precipitate some unfavorable reaction within middle and lower echelons of the government and within certain intellectual elements in Saigon.

22. The people of South Vietnam would also strongly welcome a US announcement of determination to defend South Vietnam, but would be apprehensive of Communist retaliation against South Vietnam cities should the US attack the cities of North Vietnam.

23. Laos. Phoumi and Boun Oum would probably interpret Courses B, C, or D as a US decision to harden its position in

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Southeast Asia and as raising the likelihood of US support of their position in Laos, especially if hostilities were resumed in that country. Souvanna Phouma would probably feel that his position had become impossible to maintain and he would probably either swing fully to the side of Hanoi or abandon the field to the Pathet Lao.

24. Cambodia. Sihanouk would be highly concerned by any increase in US military activity in South Vietnam, fearing that it might lead to an expansion of hostilities in which Cambodia would become involved. His traditional fear and suspicion of Thailand and South Vietnam would color his views as to US intentions. He would continue to be susceptible to Soviet or Chinese Communist pressures to accommodate Cambodian policy to Bloc purposes in Southeast Asia. Sihanouk would, however, seek to keep the North Vietnamese regime at arms length.

25. SEATO. With the exception of the UK and France, the SEATO members would welcome Courses A, B, and C as evidence of US determination to defend its allies in Southeast Asia. The SEATO members would be in varying degrees apprehensive of any US threat to carry the war to North Vietnam. France would almost certainly refuse to take part in any military activity in South Vietnam and would probably oppose such US action.

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26. Neutrals. Burma, India, and Indonesia would all take a very alarmed view of B, C, and D. Burma in particular is acutely conscious of Chinese Communist power and would be particularly susceptible to pressures from Peiping. India's criticism would center primarily upon the violations of the 1954 Geneva Accords which would be involved in any of the given courses of US action. The ICC would file reports of the US violations and its members (particularly Poland and India) would seek an international conference to resolve the conflict.

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