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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE
10-3-64

**PROBABLE COMMUNIST
REACTIONS TO CERTAIN POSSIBLE
US/GVN COURSES OF ACTIONS**

NOTE: This is an estimate as approved by the United States Intelligence Board. No further distribution will be made.

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf
9 October 1964

[REDACTED]

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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SUBJECT: ENIE 10-3-64: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN POSSIBLE US/GVN COURSES OF ACTION

SCOPE NOTE

The courses of action addressed in Section B have been given to the intelligence community for the purpose of this estimate and are not meant to represent the full range of options open to the US. It should also be noted that the paper is confined to consideration of Communist reactions and does not discuss possible reactions in the rest of the world.

A. BACKGROUND: THE COMMUNIST VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN INDOCHINA

1. The Communist powers most directly concerned, i.e., North Vietnam and Communist China, undoubtedly feel that present trends in South Vietnam are such in their favor. They anticipate that a political vacuum is forming which they

[REDACTED]

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

[REDACTED]

can probably soon fill with a "neutralist" coalition government dominated by pro-Communist elements. They see a temporary stalemate in Laos, but in their view this is strictly a secondary theater in which trends will become more favorable for them as soon as South Vietnam falls their way; in the meantime their major concern in Laos is to keep the corridor and the areas bordering North Vietnam and China in Communist hands.

2. For these reasons, they are willing for the time being to accept the Laos situation about as it is. Both there and in South Vietnam they wish to avoid actions which might risk altering the present apparently favorable course of their campaign to undermine the government of South Vietnam (GVN). While they will seek to exploit and encourage the deteriorating situation in Saigon, they probably will avoid actions that would in their view unduly increase the chances of a major US response against North Vietnam (DRV) or Communist China. We are almost certain that both Hanoi and Peiping are anxious not to become involved in the kind of war in which the great weight of superior US weaponry could be brought against them. Even if Hanoi and Peiping estimated that the US would not use nuclear weapons against them, they could not be sure of this. As of the present, however, both Hanoi and Peiping appear willing to persist in support of the Viet Cong, even to the extent of risking limited US retaliation against North Vietnam, probably on the calculation that victory is near in the South and that they could through political counteraction prevent prolonged or expanded US attacks in the North.

[REDACTED]

3. The limited US response to the Tonkin Gulf incident of 5 August, followed by assurances that US intentions were specifically limited, probably lessened Communist fear of an early major move by the US to bring the war to the North. On the other hand, natural caution plus their ideological bias makes the Communists highly suspicious of the US. Both Hanoi and Peiping have indicated serious concern over the possibility that the US will eventually carry the war to the North -- a danger which they probably think becomes more likely as the situation in the South deteriorates -- and both have taken defensive measures to meet this contingency.

4. In the face of new US pressures against the IRV, further actions by Hanoi and Peiping would be based to a considerable extent on their estimate of US intentions, i.e., whether the US was actually determined to increase its pressures as necessary. Their estimates on this point are probably uncertain, but we believe that fear of provoking severe measures by the US would lead them to temper their responses with a good deal of caution.

5. On the other hand, it is possible that at anytime Hanoi and Peiping would come to believe that the situation in South Vietnam had become so fragile that an all-out Viet Cong effort, aided by increased infiltration of personnel, would topple the anti-Communist GVN before the US could take any major action against the North. We believe that the Communists are not likely to attempt this in the immediate future because they are not yet certain enough of their

[REDACTED]

capability to achieve a quick decision by such means and probably consider the risks of major US retaliation too great. Whether or not they make such an all out effort, however, they will continue to work for the establishment of what has been their longstanding goal -- a neutralist coalition government dominated by Communists which would destroy the basis of the US position.

6. The USSR is probably uneasy about the situation in Indochina for several reasons, the most important being a realization that it might escalate to general war. If tensions increased, we believe that the Soviet interest would be to contain or reduce a crisis.

B. SPECIFIC COURSES AND RESPONSES

Category I: Resumption of [REDACTED] patrols [REDACTED]

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(b)(3)

7. We do not believe that the North Vietnamese would initiate attacks on [REDACTED] patrol destroyers unless a close approach to shore (at the least, a penetration of the Communist-claimed 12-mile limit) [REDACTED] led them to believe the destroyers were associated with an attack. However, Hanoi's desire to keep track of these vessels could accidentally lead to new incidents.

8. If for some reason the DRV did go after the US destroyers and the US retaliated with air strikes, subsequent Communist reactions would depend at least in part upon the severity of the strikes. If the strikes were confined

[REDACTED]

to North Vietnam and to targets associated with the Communist attacks, as were those of 5 August, Communist reaction would probably be limited to (a) DRV self-defense with fighters, anti-aircraft, and small arms, (b) political maneuvers and propaganda by Communist elements throughout the world, (c) additional Communist Chinese logistic support to the DRV, including possibly the introduction of more aircraft into North Vietnam.

9. If the US retaliatory strikes hit critical DRV targets not directly associated with the provocation, but were prompt and of short duration, we believe the DRV response would be about as described in para. 8. If, on the other hand, US attacks on nonassociated targets were heavier and sustained, then we believe the reactions of Hanoi and Peiping would be about as described in para. 15.

10. We think it most unlikely that the Chinese Communists would deliberately become involved with [REDACTED] patrols; but they could become inadvertently involved in an action arising from a DRV-US patrol engagement. If so, and if the US retaliation was confined to Chinese Communist targets directly associated with the engagement, the Communist military response would again probably be limited to defensive action. It must be noted, however, that an attack by the US against bases in Communist China, whether provoked unintentionally or deliberately by the Chinese, would introduce a new factor in the Southeast Asian situation, i.e., a direct confrontation of US-Chinese forces. In such case, the

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(b)(3)

[REDACTED]

Chinese Communists might feel obligated to play a more direct role in the US/DRV conflict. On the international diplomatic front widespread fear of a major international war would enable the Communists to stir up substantial pressures against the US.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Category III: Air action and/or ground operations against infiltration-associated targets in the Lao panhandle.

12. Communist response to US/GVN air action against the infiltration-associated targets in the panhandle would probably be confined to (a) some improvement in passive and AAA defense in the area (b) political and propaganda responses, and (c) Viet Cong sabotage and ground raids directed against the US/GVN air bases. We do not believe that they would launch air attacks on these air bases, because of their very limited capabilities and the fear of provoking air retaliation on their own bases.

[REDACTED]

13. The reaction to GVN or US/GVN ground action against the panhandle infiltration route would depend largely upon the magnitude and duration of the action. At the lower end of the scale, a small hit-and-run raid with a limited objective would probably evoke little more than an attempt to improve PL/DRV capabilities for early detection and ambush of similar future efforts. On the other hand, actions penetrating a considerable distance which threatened PL/DRV use of infiltration routes and bases would probably draw additional Communist forces into the area. We believe it unlikely that the DRV would initiate any large-scale aggression in Laos or GVN, although some additions to or redeployments of PAVN forces in Laos might occur. It is also possible that the Communists would counter by seizing such vulnerable targets in southern Laos as Attapeu and Saravane.

Category IV: A systematic pattern of gradually intensifying US/GVN attacks against targets in the DRV itself, including those associated with infiltration routes and military and economic targets. These attacks on the DRV would not include the use of nuclear weapons or US ground forces in organized US combat units. This program would be combined with directly communicated assurances that US objectives were confined to eliminating outside Communist support and guidance of the Viet Cong and Pathet Lao insurrections.

14. This category corresponds closely to the latter stages of the courses (or "assumptions") which formed the basis for SNIE 50-2-64, "Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos," dated 25 May 1964. Since the publication of that SNIE the GVN position in South Vietnam has

[REDACTED]

deteriorated, the Tonkin Gulf incidents have occurred, and Communist China has furnished North Vietnam with additional support. In addition, divisions within the Communist camp have increased.

15. With the initial phase of US attacks on targets within the DRV which were not directly connected with retaliation, Hanoi and Peiping would probably conclude that the US had embarked on a systematic pattern of attacks on DRV military-related targets. At this point we believe they would probably attempt to dissuade the US by a mixture of moves, including some apparent concessions to US wishes, efforts to mobilize international opinion against the US, and actions designed to underline Communist determination. Hanoi would probably direct the Viet Cong to launch no dramatic new attacks and might direct them to reduce temporarily the tempo and size of their attacks. To mobilize international pressure against the US, Communist and leftist propaganda facilities would attack US "war madness" and stress the danger that US actions might bring on World War III. Hanoi would probably make an all out propaganda and diplomatic drive for negotiations and, to this end, there might be private hints of some willingness to accommodate US/DRV views. Hanoi and Peiping would increase their threats of counteractions and both would probably undertake force deployments designed to add to the credibility of these threats, though we doubt that the DRV would attempt any overt invasion of Laos or South Vietnam. Hanoi would certainly appeal for Chinese Communist defensive assistance, (radars, anti-aircraft artillery, additional combat aircraft, patrol craft, and technical



sonnel) which Peiping would probably supply. We doubt that Hanoi would request these Communist ground troops at this juncture. However, Hanoi would exploit the arrival of Chinese "volunteers," and, to this end, might publicize arrivals of Chinese advisors. Hanoi would also appeal to the Soviets. The USSR would make propaganda and political efforts on behalf of the DRV, and perhaps consent to furnish some military equipment, but would almost certainly take steps to insure that Hanoi and Peiping were kept aware of the limits of Soviet support.

16. If, despite Communist efforts, the US attacks continued, Hanoi's leaders would have to ask themselves whether it was not better to suspend their support of Viet Cong military action rather than suffer the destruction of their major military facilities and the industrial sector of their economy. In the belief that the tide has set almost irreversibly in their favor in South Vietnam, they might calculate that the Viet Cong could stop its military attacks for the time being and renew the insurrection successfully at a later date. Their judgment on this matter might be reinforced by the Chinese Communist concern over becoming involved in a conflict with US air and naval power. The DRV might consider this a reasonable price to pay in order to reduce the likelihood of damaging US attacks on the DRV. They would then press for a negotiated ceasefire in the South and try to promote an international conference to pursue their ends. However, they would not be prepared to make any meaningful concessions such as agreeing to effective international inspection of infiltration routes.



[REDACTED]

17. On the other hand, in a test of wills with the US, the Communists might embark on a bold course, feeling that the prize to be won by all-out attacks on South Vietnam outweighed any damage to be suffered from continued US attacks on the DRV. They might feel that any benefits to be gained by buying time would be more than offset by a loss of momentum at a time when victory appeared near, by a loss of face with the VC, and by the consequent bolstering of US/GVN morale. Hanoi would have in mind that concessions under such circumstances might only invite the US to resume strikes upon any renewal of Viet Cong military activity. In this case the DRV would carry on the fight and proceed to send its own armed forces on a large scale to Laos and South Vietnam. Hanoi might assume that the US would be unwilling to undertake a major ground war, or that if it was, it could ultimately be defeated by the methods which were successful against the French.

18. In a situation involving so many levels of possible escalation we cannot make a confident judgment as to which course the DRV leaders would choose. On balance, we incline to the view that they would choose the conservative course outlined in para. 16, largely on the grounds that they would consider that they were not giving up much more than a little time in return for avoiding great physical damage to their country and escaping the risk of uncontrollable further

[REDACTED]

escalation. There is substantial danger, however, that the DRV might choose the more aggressive course discussed in para. 17.*

19. If the DRV should choose the more aggressive course, the question of Communist Chinese intervention would arise. At this stage, Peiping would probably make its threats of intervention stronger and more specific. If it had not already done so, it would almost certainly deploy large forces to areas near Vietnam and Laos. Peiping might commit units of its air force to defensive action over North Vietnam at this point, but in view of the magnitude of US air and naval superiority we doubt that Peiping would do so. However, Hanoi and Peiping would probably introduce limited numbers of Chinese Communist ground forces as "volunteers," both to prepare for further escalation and to make clear Peiping's commitment to assist the North Vietnamese. It is also possible, though unlikely, that unacknowledged Chinese Communist units would make deep incursions into Laos and perhaps even into Thailand and Burma.

20. We believe that Communist China would be very reluctant to become directly involved in the fighting in Indochina lest this be taken by the US as a cause for major retaliation against the Chinese mainland. In our view, the Chinese Communists would not be disposed to engage openly with US forces unless they felt it was necessary in order to prevent destruction of the Communist regime

* The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the DRV would find the arguments in paragraph 17 more persuasive and would choose that course, considering that at this juncture it had optimum provocation as well as international acceptance for overt retaliation in South Vietnam.

[REDACTED]

in North Vietnam. We therefore believe there would not be high risk of the introduction of large-scale Chinese ground force combat units unless major US/GVN ground units had moved to occupy areas of the DRV or Communist-held territory in northern Laos, or possibly, the Chinese had committed their air and had subsequently suffered attacks on CCAF bases in China. Nevertheless, there is always a chance that Peiping might so intervene either for reasons that seem irrational to us or because it miscalculated the objectives of US moves in the area. Communist China's capability for conducting a ground war in adjacent areas of southeast Asia is formidable.

21. As the escalation progressed, the USSR would be increasingly concerned to bring an end to the crisis. It would probably make plain to Hanoi and Peiping that they could look for no substantial Soviet support. The Soviets would seek to augment international pressures on the US to bring it to the conference table. To this end they might offer hints of intervention, but we believe that they would refrain from military actions in the area and would not take the occasion to provoke a crisis with the US elsewhere.

C. GENERAL CONSEQUENCES

22. Even if US actions along the lines described above in Category IV clearly succeeded in halting outside support for the Viet Cong effort, the principal accomplishment would not be a solution to the larger problem of South Vietnam, but rather the buying of time in which to continue US efforts to establish a viable regime in the South and to deal with indigenous Viet Cong insurgency.