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The Outlook from Hard Factors Affecting North Vietnam's Policy
on the War in Vietnam

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SUBJECT: SNIE 14.3-70: THE OUTLOOK FROM HANOI: FACTORS AFFECTING
NORTH VIETNAM'S POLICY ON THE WAR IN
VIETNAM

THE PROBLEM


To assess the factors affecting Hanoi's outlook on the war in
Vietnam and to estimate its probable course of action during 1970.

CONCLUSIONS

A. Hanoi's primary aims are to develop North Vietnam along
"socialist" lines and to extend its control over South Vietnam.
Currently, its leaders seem to believe that the first of these goals
has been scanted and must be given greater attention. They also believe
that the US presence in Vietnam is the major obstacle to the achieve-
ment of their objectives.

B. Hanoi still considers that it has the will and basic strengths
to prevail. But it also plainly realizes that its position in the

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South has declined. In particular, it is apprehensive concerning Vietnamization; it fears that the longer the program goes on without effective challenge, the greater the likelihood that the GVN can develop the capability to hold its own without a substantial US military presence.

C. In this state of affairs, Hanoi has essentially three options. The first, to undertake an all-out military effort, would involve heavier losses and greater risks than Hanoi seems willing to contemplate. Moreover, for the next six months at least, the Communists might calculate that such action would slow the US departure rather than hasten it. In time, however, as further US forces depart and as Hanoi has more time to repair existing deficiencies, it might be tempted to seek quick and decisive results in new large offensives.

D. The second and, in our view, the likeliest course for the Communists through 1970 is to pursue a prolonged war much along present lines. Even with this approach, they will wish to inflict setbacks to Vietnamization and pacification, to impose casualties on US troops, and to keep pressure on the South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF), including possible occasional major tests. Thus, there could be fairly sharp fighting later this spring or thereafter which might produce sizable US and RVNAF losses. The problem with this course from Hanoi's point of view is that it still involves relatively high casualties, prolongs the strains of the war in North Vietnam and on the weakened Communist apparatus in the South, and offers no certain hope of a decisive success in the foreseeable future.

E. The third option, to negotiate an arrangement which would speed US withdrawal, has -- in the past at least -- seemed to the Communists to have more risks than advantages. Hanoi probably fears that any political formula that could win US withdrawal would also undermine the overall Communist position in the South. But given the uncertain prospects in South Vietnam and the current Communist priority on getting US forces out, Hanoi may see some utility in probing the possibility of some arrangement which it calculates would hasten US withdrawal or fix a timetable for such withdrawal. In this process, any concessions that the Communists might make would almost certainly be limited and not aimed at an overall negotiated settlement.

DISCUSSION

1. Hanoi's aims are to develop the North along "socialist" lines and to extend its control to the South, which from its point of view is an integral part of its domain.^{1/} Despite years of strenuous effort and sacrifice, neither goal seems close to realization.

^{1/} When we refer to "Hanoi," we mean the Vietnamese Communist Party, which has always regarded itself as national in scope, not as an entity confined to what is referred to as "North Vietnam." From the date of its founding 40 years ago, the prime objective of the Party has always been the acquisition of political control over all of Vietnam and some form of domination over Laos and Cambodia.

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I. HANOI'S VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

2. From our perspective, the Communists are in trouble in South Vietnam. Their casualties still exceed their infiltration and local recruitment rates. The quality of their forces is also declining, and the VC forces continue to depend heavily on NVA support. The morale of Communist cadres and soldiers has declined further. Their already troublesome supply problems are complicated by Cambodia's variable attitude toward the movement of Communist materiel across its territory. Large areas of the South Vietnamese countryside are being denied to them, and this reduces their access to manpower and economic resources. These losses have also reduced Communist capabilities to maintain an effective political apparatus and to proselytize and gain political support. Although the people of South Vietnam remain politically apathetic, they seem less disposed to cooperate with the Communists. But these are our views; the question is whether the Communists see their situation in the same way.

3. We believe that to some extent they do. Though Communist statements and documents normally contain lists of shortcomings, there was a more sombre tone following the 1968 Tet offensive. Communist cadres have been roundly excoriated for their shortcomings, particularly in the political field, have been exhorted to do more, and have then been reproached for failing once again. In mid-1969, COSVN Resolution 9 seemed to admit that Communist capabilities had been considerably reduced. It contained the most explicit catalogue of Communist

liabilities yet to appear in a high-level Communist document. This has continued to be a common theme in captured documents and in the testimony of Communist prisoners and ralliers. Finally, in December, General Giap pointed out that the Communists had ignored many of the cardinal precepts of fighting a "people's war," and declared it imperative to repair these faults even if this meant going on the defensive temporarily.

4. In South Vietnam, Hanoi has taken various actions to cope with its difficulties in the military field. In an effort to avoid the heavy casualties associated with large-scale military actions, the Communists have resorted to tactics designed to conserve manpower. They have increasingly relied on small unit, sapper, and shelling actions directed against South Vietnamese territorial security forces and Allied field positions and military installations. They have sent five main force regiments into the Mekong Delta to bolster their eroding position. At the same time, there is a concerted effort to halt the erosion of guerrilla and local forces; indeed, in some areas it appears that NVA main force units are being broken up and assigned to lower echelons.

5. The Communists seem to fear that they have overemphasized military action and neglected the political and subversive base. They have begun a significant restructuring of their apparatus in South Vietnam, apparently designed to enhance its staying power. This restructuring consists of: (a) the movement of cadres into government-held territory, often under the guise of defectors; (b) the transfer of experienced cadres from military to political bureaucracies; and (c)

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the tightening up of the party structure by raising standards and conducting purges. The Communists also have stepped up efforts to subvert the South Vietnamese people and military. And, in a significant departure from past practice, many -- perhaps most -- of the operatives are being assigned strategic or long term responsibilities instead of tactical functions. Finally, the Communists are attempting to refurbish and strengthen their mass organizations.

6. Despite Hanoi's obvious concern with its problems, the Communists almost certainly believe that they enjoy some basic strengths and advantages which will ultimately prove to be decisive. They see themselves as the only valid representatives of Vietnamese nationalism; in their eyes, the Saigon regime could not sustain itself if deprived of US support. The recent GVN military and political gains are probably not considered by Hanoi to have been either crippling or irreversible. Hanoi probably believes that its infrastructure is inherently more durable than that of the GVN, although it must be bothered by the degree of political stability achieved in South Vietnam over the past few years and by the fact that the GVN, whatever its efficiency, has now extended its presence over a greater area and a larger number of people than for several years. Militarily, the Communists attach considerable importance to controlling the adjacent Laotian and Cambodian border areas, which they probably believe can continue to serve as base areas and sanctuaries.^{2/}

^{2/} See SNIE 58-70, "The Communist View of the Situation in Laos," dated 5 February 1970, for our estimate of the situation in Laos.

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7. Even if US support is withdrawn only gradually, Hanoi almost certainly believes that the GVN can be undermined sufficiently to enable the Communists to move from their rice roots positions to an eventual seizure of power. The Communists count heavily on their abilities in the areas of guerrilla war, terrorism, and political organization and agitation to exploit basic vulnerabilities in the South Vietnamese situation -- vulnerabilities which they think will become more pronounced as time passes. Hanoi must be heartened by President Thieu's failure to rally greater political support, by the GVN's economic difficulties, and by the general war weariness of the people of South Vietnam. Hanoi probably also draws some encouragement from attempts by oppositionist political figures in Saigon to exploit grievances and popular aspirations for peace, and by their increasing boldness in criticizing the Thieu government. None of these vulnerabilities has proved decisive as long as US troops anchored the military effort and shored up the Thieu regime. But with the US now moving out of Vietnam, Hanoi's leaders probably are counting on better opportunities to develop in the future and are bent on trying to be ready to exploit them.

II. HANOI'S VIEW OF US POLICY AND VIETNAMIZATION

A. US Policy

8. Hanoi's assessment of US policy in Vietnam probably has undergone several shifts in the past 18 months. In the latter part of 1968 and early 1969, the Communists seemed to believe there was a good chance

V. OUTLOOK

27. In Hanoi's view, the US presence in South Vietnam is the major obstacle to the achievement of its goals. In attempting to get around this obstacle, Hanoi has three basic options: (a) undertaking another all-out military effort to break US will by inflicting heavy casualties and exposing GVN military weaknesses; (b) prolonging the struggle in the hope that the South Vietnamese leadership cannot keep up the fight as US force levels diminish; and (c) offering sufficient concessions in negotiations to speed the US withdrawal. The Communists can, of course, shift from one military option to the other, and in Hanoi's view, either could lead eventually to more substantive negotiations.

28. At present, Hanoi does not seem willing to pay the price and assume the risks likely to attend an all-out military effort. In addition to the heavy Communist casualties this would involve, Hanoi probably calculates that, for the next six months at least, such action would slow, rather than hasten, US withdrawal and might lead to an escalation of the US military effort. In time, however, as further US forces depart and as Hanoi has more time to repair existing deficiencies, it might be tempted to seek quick and decisive results in new large offensives.

29. Attempting to wear out US resolve through prolonged war is more or less what the Communists are presently doing. This course puts substantially fewer strains on their capabilities, but it still ties

down Communist manpower and resources in what could be an indecisive struggle for an indefinite period. Hanoi might fear that this would further reduce its popular support among South Vietnamese and further erode its general position in the South. Moreover, though this approach complicates on-going GVN and US programs, including Vietnamization, it is not likely to curtail them significantly.

30. Even if it adopted the option of prolonged struggle, Hanoi would probably believe it necessary to sustain a level of military action sufficient to maintain pressure on the Vietnamization and pacification programs and to inflict casualties on both RVNAF and US forces. Indeed, it is rather clear that the Communists are preparing for an early increase in military activity. While these activities will probably be aimed at selected targets and involve relatively modest objectives and commitment of forces, certain "key" targets might be hit hard. Some RVNAF units might be selected for attack, particularly in the Delta or I Corps as a test of Vietnamization; in addition, the Delta area appears as a likely target for extensive attacks on the pacification program. Attacks by fire will probably increase and even a few coordinated sapper/main force attacks on towns and cities might be attempted. But even in maintaining relatively low levels of warfare, significant losses would be incurred by the Communists; their force levels are likely to decline even further during the next six months, barring a substantial increase in their rate of infiltration and recruitment in South Vietnam.

31. Despite the risks and costs of a prolonged struggle, Hanoi's actions over the past year and the policy statements emanating from the regime's leaders strongly indicate that this is the course the Communists intend to pursue. They seem to have concluded that a more measured and balanced approach to the war is necessary to preserve their military structure, to strengthen their Party apparatus, and to rebuild popular support. This approach apparently stems from two basic judgments on Hanoi's part. First, they see an increasing possibility that the US/GVN effort will continue at effective levels for some indefinite period; second, they believe that somewhere in the evolving situation there will be a possibility of a sudden change or critical opportunity which they must be in position to exploit.

32. While we believe that the Communists are buckling down for the long haul and that they will not try to alter the military situation in South Vietnam decisively in 1970, we also believe that Hanoi is not satisfied with the way the war is going. Given the evident strains of the war in North Vietnam and the decline in the Communist position in the South relative to the GVN, the Communists might be tempted within the year to seek an arrangement at Paris which would hasten US withdrawal within a stated period. So far, at least, the Communists have been unwilling to use negotiations for anything more than tactical purposes. Hanoi probably fears that any political formula which could win US withdrawal would also undermine the overall Communist position

and objectives in the South, and therefore may consider that serious negotiations must await a weakening of the US position and the strengthening of the Communist position in the South.

33. Nonetheless, Hanoi's presence in Paris and Le Duc Tho's recent return there evidence a continuing interest in negotiations. Although Hanoi probably harbors little hope of reaching an overall political settlement, including a coalition government, it may see some utility in probing the possibility of some arrangement which it calculates would hasten US withdrawal or fix a timetable for such withdrawal.

34. At a minimum, Hanoi would of course hope that such action would sharpen US-GVN differences and stimulate antiwar sentiment in the US. Any concessions which Hanoi might make in the coming months will almost certainly be limited, and aimed at speeding US withdrawals rather than toward an overall settlement.