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SNIE 14.3-70
5 February 1970

(b) (3)

SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

NUMBER 14.3-70

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

Submitted by



DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

as indicated overleaf

5 February 1970

Authenticated:



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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

5 February 1970

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 achievement 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.

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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.

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

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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

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that the US would choose to extract itself from the conflict on the best terms it could get, but extract itself in any event. In the first months of the Nixon Administration, this belief seemed to be manifested in two major political moves -- the announcement in May 1969 of a "new" Ten-Point Peace Proposal, and the formation in June of a "Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam." Both seemed to reflect increased interest in pursuing possible US concessions by exploiting the negotiating track.

9. Around mid-year, however, as it became evident to Hanoi that Washington was not ready to settle for merely a "face-saver" in South Vietnam, a prolonged stalemate ensued in Paris. Hanoi came to realize that, barring additional Communist military pressure or political concessions, the US intended to leave only gradually and under conditions in which the GVN and South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) would be strengthened sufficiently to meet the Communist threat with minimal US military support -- the program of Vietnamization.

B. Vietnamization

10. Although Hanoi almost certainly still believes that its will to persist over the long haul remains stronger than that of the US, the Communists see themselves, perhaps for the first time, confronted with an allied strategy designed to challenge this fundamental assumption. Hanoi's view, reflected in practically every public and private Communist statement on the subject, is that Vietnamization is the

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device through which the US plans to prolong the war, to maintain large forces in Vietnam for an extended period, and to perpetuate the Thieu regime. The Communists may see the remaining US military presence not only as large enough to constitute a formidable obstacle to future Communist military action but also, by virtue of its essential combat support make-up, as being less vulnerable to heavy casualties. Hanoi probably fears that this may substantially reduce antiwar sentiments in the US, thus giving the administration considerably more flexibility in its timetable for total withdrawal and in its general policy and goals in South Vietnam.

11. Hanoi may calculate that the Vietnamization program is inherently fragile and likely to become increasingly so as additional US troops are withdrawn. But Hanoi probably also recognizes that the program may work well enough and long enough to give the GVN a fair chance of holding its own without a substantial US military presence, and that the longer the program remains unchallenged, the greater the danger that both the South Vietnamese populace and the Communist cadres will consider that it is succeeding. For this reason alone, the Communists are likely to seek out opportunities to inflict setbacks, however minor, to the program.

12. Thus far, the Communists have not subjected the RVNAF to major tests. Hanoi probably considers that developments to date provide insufficient evidence of the US timetable for withdrawal or the RVNAF's

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ability to fill the gaps left by departing US units. Hanoi may be waiting until more US units have departed, in the expectation that this will provide better opportunities with lesser risks, and that Communist forces will be better prepared to strike. At some point, however, Hanoi will probably feel compelled either to engage the RVNAF seriously, or to face up to the prospect of a considerably prolonged struggle.

13. Hanoi probably views the GVN's pacification effort as an integral and key element in the Vietnamization strategy. During the past year and one-half, the GVN has sharply reduced the population controlled or influenced by the Communists. As a result, Communist access to local manpower and sources of supply is being restricted, the mobility of many Communist units limited, and local cadre exposed and demoralized. Hanoi may well believe that GVN pacification progress is essentially fragile and can be rolled back once US forces are out of the way. However, it may now feel compelled to recognize that further contraction of Communist-controlled areas, or even a prolonged continuation of the current situation, will limit the ability of its forces to confront the RVNAF, to launch major attacks on population centers, or even to wage a prolonged struggle. Propaganda, prisoners, ralliers, and captured documents indicate that Hanoi does realize this danger and plans to devote increasing resources to countering the pacification effort.

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III. DOMESTIC NORTH VIETNAMESE FACTORS

A. The Post-Ho Leadership and Policy

14. The death of Ho Chi Minh was a severe loss to the Communist cause. Ho was widely regarded as a nationalist, and he tried to stand above the terrorism and treachery of the Communist resistance in the preindependence period and the subsequent excesses of the Hanoi government. None of his heirs has his charisma; without Ho, the regime loses some of its appeal as the defender of Vietnamese nationalism. Ho's heirs probably understand that they lack his authority and cannot match his ability to extract the extra sacrifices and effort from the cadre and people in the North.

15. It would be surprising if Ho's death has not introduced some uncertainties within the top leadership. Although his disciples have been working together for common goals for nearly four decades, they almost certainly have held differing views on key issues over the years, and it would be most unusual if they were devoid of personal ambitions. Ho's commanding presence did not stifle debate, but he was an umpire whose rulings were accepted, and his authority served to maintain a basic unity in support of agreed policies. In the absence of a recognized leader within the collective, the achievement of this unity may now become more difficult.

16. As yet, no single individual seems to have emerged as the dominant member of the Politburo. A case can be made that either Le Duan, the Party First Secretary, or Truong Chinh, Chairman of the National Assembly Standing Committee, is first among equals. A rather shadowy figure, rarely emerging except on important occasions, Le Duan was ranked first in published listings of the leadership at Ho's funeral, is frequently quoted (along with Ho) in articles and speeches by other Party Leaders, and gave the keynote speech on the 40th anniversary of the Party earlier this month. On the other hand, Truong Chinh has been seen much more frequently in public since Ho's funeral. Indeed, his star has been on the rise again since mid-1968,^{3/} when he made a major speech which implicitly scored the lack of preparation, particularly in the political and organizational fields, in prosecuting the war in the South and in attempting to build socialism in the North. There are, moreover, other potential claimants to the number one position, notably Pham Van Dong who was a long-time personal friend of Ho's and is currently ranked third in the Politburo.

17. In any event, we see no indication that the leadership is immobilized or in a state of disarray over policy differences. The shift in Hanoi's line in respect to the war in the South has not been abrupt -- it has evolved over a considerable period. This has probably

^{3/} Truong Chinh was one of the founders of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In 1956, he was made the scapegoat for the regime's ill-fated land reform policies and removed from his post as Secretary General of the Party.

served to allow more time for accommodation and to mute the impact of Ho's death on the leadership.

B. Party Authority and Discipline

18. Even before Ho died, Hanoi seemed concerned that Party authority and discipline had declined and that an unhealthy degree of ideological slippage had taken place. In effect, the regime seems to be admitting that the Party has been slack in exercising its role as the "vanguard" and that this has led to a lack of responsiveness to Party directives across the board. To improve the Party apparatus, the regime is relying on exhortations, self-criticism, some reshuffling of personnel, and an increased emphasis on the first principle of Party organization -- ideological purity. In the recent heavy emphasis on the Party's key role in guiding the military effort, there is also a suggestion of a need to improve morale and tighten discipline in the armed services. These problems are not critical enough to threaten the regime's viability, but they do go to the heart of the Communist system and probably add to the urgency with which the regime is directing its efforts to internal affairs.

C. Economic Conditions

19. The economic situation has improved only slightly since the bombing halt. Distribution bottlenecks are common, shortages of consumer goods are endemic, rice substitutes continue to make up a

substantial part of the normal diet, human and material resources are ill-utilized, and import requirements remain high. Many of these problems are a result of the bombing, some are inherent in the bureaucratic and ideological rigidities associated with Communist states in general, and some have been aggravated by bad weather. A brief report on the 1970 economic plan suggests that emphasis will be put on production of food and other consumer goods, but little improvement is likely to result so long as the war continues. North Vietnam has always been a poor country, however, and the current stringencies are not critical, nor are they likely to become so as long as Moscow and Peking continue to provide assistance to offset shortfalls in production.

D. Manpower Strains

20. North Vietnam clearly has felt the manpower pinch caused by its massive infiltration effort from late 1967 to mid-1969. The country has sufficient manpower to maintain essential economic and security functions in North Vietnam and to increase support to the wars in South Vietnam and Laos should it desire to do so. But the quantitative aspect is only part of the story. Hanoi must consider the longer term impact on the strength and vigor of its society of the death or maiming of its men at rates which in both 1968 and 1969 surpassed the annual total of physically fit males reaching draft age. Such sacrifices would probably be acceptable to Hanoi if they achieved an early and decisive result; but they would almost certainly begin to produce profound social and

political consequences if extended over a long period. More immediately, the war has brought substantial dislocations and strain on the population. Reallocations of manpower have resulted in a decline in efficiency and production, and the effort to replace heavy combat losses has produced a deterioration in the quality of the troops and cadres dispatched to South Vietnam. We believe that concern for this situation helped lead Hanoi in 1968 to adopt tactics designed to conserve manpower and in the latter part of 1969 to reduce its infiltration rate.

E. Popular Attitudes

21. The cumulative dislocations of the war seem to have produced a general domestic letdown within North Vietnam. This letdown has increased as the direct pressures of the war on the population have lessened. With the bombing halts, the advent of negotiations, and probably some popular hope for a settlement, people have tended to relax. Ho's death probably has led to some further decline in morale. In general, the regime's claims of one success after another probably are wearing thin, particularly in face of the enormous number of youths sent South and never seen again and the increasing number of maimed soldiers who have returned to North Vietnam.

22. A decline in discipline has also shown itself in a variety of ways, none of them overly significant by itself, but collectively of some consequence. Cupidity seems to be on the rise, fed by bureaucratic

inefficiencies. There seems to be a general disposition, extending even into the Party and army, to evade some of the regime's regulations. Black marketeering, hooliganism, and similar breaches of law and order may have increased. Military recruitment is apparently running into some trouble, and as a result the regime has resorted to a propaganda campaign to encourage enlistments.

23. Hanoi has manifested its concern by strengthening its internal security apparatus and procedures, and it has dwelt regularly on the need to heighten "revolutionary vigilance" and to uncover "counter-revolutionary plots." Some of this, of course, is the normal use of exaggeration to make a point. But it appears to run somewhat deeper and to represent a definite effort to root out even latent signs of disquietude in every quarter. In some cases, the regime's approach is simply to tighten the screws, but there also are signs of greater efforts to reduce pent up grievances by giving more attention to the welfare of the people. Such measures will probably be sufficient to keep the problem within bounds. But the leadership has major domestic problems which have caused it to give more of its attention to the North than conditions of recent years have permitted.

IV. IMPACT OF THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT

24. The excesses of the Cultural Revolution in China and the attendant worsening of relations between Moscow and Peking raised the

spectre in Hanoi of the termination of vital Soviet munitions shipments via China and the possibility of diminished US restraint in prosecuting the war against North Vietnam. But US bombing has stopped, and supplies have continued to arrive -- albeit with occasional delays -- even during the heightened Sino-Soviet border tensions in mid-1969. And Hanoi has been able throughout to maintain a balanced political position between Moscow and Peking.

25. At this juncture, therefore, the North Vietnamese must be reasonably certain that the USSR and China will continue to provide adequate support for both the economy of the North and the war in the South. Moreover, Hanoi probably believes that even under conditions of heightened tensions, both Moscow and Peking would make every effort to continue deliveries.

26. Even in the event of larger scale and more widespread Sino-Soviet border fighting, Hanoi probably would have adequate amounts of most essential military and civilian supplies to support current levels of consumption for several months while the situation could be assessed. If, however, such fighting were to continue for very many weeks, Hanoi would have grave concern about its supply lines. In these circumstances, the North Vietnamese leaders might deem it prudent further to scale down the level of military operations in the South, or even to move toward a cease-fire.

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

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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.

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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

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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.