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Reaction to Various US Courses of Action

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REACTIONS TO VARIOUS US COURSES OF ACTION

NOTE

In the following section we consider Communist reactions to an increase in US troop levels by about 200,000, an intensification of the bombing program against military, industrial, and transportation targets, and a similar bombing program plus the effective interdiction of North Vietnamese harbors. We also consider the effect on Communist policy of leveling off of US troop commitments, and a reduction in the bombing.

Reactions to Expanded US Military Efforts

1. There is ample evidence that over recent months the North Vietnamese have preferred to continue the war, even with the likely prospect of its intensification, rather than to end it by negotiation or otherwise. They must have calculated that their refusal to move toward negotiations during the Tet period would subject them to an expansion of the US bombing program and possibly other forms of escalation. Moreover, their own military efforts in South Vietnam, especially in the northern provinces, must have been taken with the realization that the ground war would intensify and perhaps invite new US counteraction. Finally, the North Vietnamese in the past several months have apparently discussed with both the USSR and China additional and perhaps new forms of assistance.

2. While Hanoi may have been unsure as to the ways or the degree that the US would intensify the war, it appears to be taking measures to cope with heightened military pressures. For one thing, there has been a sharp increase in shipping to North Vietnam thus far in 1967. The North Vietnamese are almost certainly planning to strengthen their air defense

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with Soviet assistance in the expectation of ever increasing bombing attacks. And the transport of supplies through Laos suggests they believe the ground war will expand, at least during the next rainy season.

3. It may be that Hanoi's intransigence and posture of determination cloaks a final effort to gain a more favorable military position preparatory to negotiations. But it would be more prudent to assume that Hanoi does not expect any sudden and dramatic turn of the battle in its favor. Rather it appears to expect that a prolonged struggle will be necessary, and to believe that it can sustain such a struggle in the South and bear up under intensified bombing in the North with Chinese and Soviet assistance.

Course A: The US announces and begins to implement an increase of US forces of about 200,000.

4. The US action might dispel certain notions that Hanoi has entertained about a weakening of US resolve. Even though some increases may be anticipated by the Communists, Hanoi's political-military calculations have rested greatly on a belief that domestic political pressures and international commitments would limit the US' ability to add to its forces in Vietnam. Moreover, Communist military plans now aim at stretching US and ARVN forces to the point where the Communists can both deliver a major setback to the Revolutionary Development program and score an important local victory over US forces. Finally, the idea of a war of attrition, as the Communists define it, implies a progressive weakening of US and ARVN forces over time, or at least the achievement of a stalemate which would heighten pressures on the US to negotiate on more favorable terms.

5. Since Hanoi almost certainly believes that the military and political outcome of the war will be decided primarily by developments in South Vietnam, it has been willing to absorb considerable bomb damage as long as the ability to continue the war in the

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South was unimpaired. Accordingly, the North Vietnamese would recognize that a large increase in US forces was more of a threat to their objectives than increased bombing. They would probably see the possibility that the US could have sufficient forces to deal with local situations, such as the DMZ area, as well as add significantly to the protection of secured areas.

6. Nevertheless, the effect, not the fact, of the US buildup would basically determine Hanoi's reaction. Hanoi would have to be persuaded that the additional troops would decisively turn the battle in the South against them. The North Vietnamese might believe that the US action could be countered by a relatively small increase in their own main forces. They might believe that if the fighting continued for another year at a new and higher level, the situation would then be even more politically frustrating for the US and might generate increased domestic pressure to end the war, especially in a Presidential election year.

7. On the other hand, there are certain trends which are already unfavorable to the Communists: they are suffering heavy losses, recruitment in South Vietnam is increasingly difficult and there are accumulating signs of deterioration and declining morale in the Viet Cong military-political infrastructure. At some point, North Vietnam, if it wished to continue the war, would have to rely heavily on infiltrated North Vietnamese. These soldiers cannot take over effectively the local political/guerrilla role of the VC; they are best suited for combat in regular unit formations and they require a considerable logistic support system. If they could be contained in the uplands away from the main centers of population, they could not do much to halt the further deterioration of the VC apparatus in the lowlands and the Communists would be in danger of losing their political base in the South. They would then have to recognize that their prospects for success either militarily or by political means were continuously declining.

8. Moscow and Peking. So long as Hanoi did not alter its basic policy toward the war, the US

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buildup would probably not occasion any significant change in Soviet or Chinese policies. North Vietnam would probably receive some heavier weaponry for use by the Communist forces in the South. Beyond this, the Soviets might at some point during the buildup counsel Hanoi to seek an end to the continuing escalation, but we strongly doubt that they would be willing to apply any significant pressure on Hanoi to this end. Peking, however, would continue to urge unyielding military resistance.

Course B: The US continues the war on about the present scale of effort, increasing forces in South Vietnam by no more than a division or so.

9. Hanoi. The North Vietnamese leaders would be relieved as it gradually became apparent that US strength was leveling off. They would probably interpret it as confirmation of their recent estimate that the US policy is constrained by internal political factors and foreign commitments. Even though the war is not going well for the Communists, they would probably believe that US reluctance to commit a larger number of new troops gave them an excellent chance to persist in their present strategy and outlast the US in the war of attrition. Hanoi might also calculate that it would win a "decisive" battle under these conditions. We are not saying, however, that maintaining US forces at present levels insures Hanoi's ability to prolong the war for another two years. Again, much depends on the operational situation in South Vietnam.

10. Moscow and Peking. There would be little reason for either Moscow or Peking to react to a leveling off of US troop deployments. The Chinese would be encouraged in their belief that the US could not fight a protracted war. The USSR might be somewhat relieved that the US had not embarked on a further escalation, but would have no special incentive to bring greater pressure on Hanoi for negotiations.

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Course C. The US intensifies bombing of military, industrial, and transportation targets, except near the Chinese border. It does not attack population centers, seek to close ports, or attack dikes or airfields other than those already struck.

11. As far as Hanoi is concerned, this program is well under way. Moreover, the bombing is not the most significant aspect of the war for Hanoi. Short of a major invasion or nuclear attack, there is probably no level of air or naval action against North Vietnam which Hanoi has determined in advance would be so intolerable that the war had to be stopped. And it probably also calculates that as the US increases air action and a toll is inevitably taken of the civilian population, various political pressures on the US to desist will mount.

12. We cannot say what precise counteractions the Communists may take as this program is developed. There is not necessarily a close relationship between a given level of bombing and Hanoi's strategy and tactics or Peking and Moscow's responses. Material from captured documents suggests that long-range military planning in South Vietnam proceeds without much reference to US bombing of North Vietnam. Moreover, those Chinese and Soviet reactions which are visible, e.g., the provision of men and equipment, often come before or in an early phase of new US bombing programs. In our view all three Communist Parties react less to strikes against specific targets than to the intensification of bombing in general.

13. Though we recognize that morale and national will are not susceptible to exact measurement, this bombing program is not likely to be the decisive element in breaking the will of North Vietnam. Nor would it alone be likely to force North Vietnam to change its attitude toward negotiations. Probably the critical factors for Hanoi would still be its view of the war's prospects in the South and its judgment as to whether international and domestic pressures on the US would increase significantly in these circumstances.

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14. The intensified bombing program would cause North Vietnam to seek and obtain an ever growing level of assistance from China and from the USSR. The net result would probably be an expansion of Chinese troop presence, probably including the introduction of combat infantry at some of the bases apparently being prepared for Chinese use. Incidents involving Chinese air space would be almost certain to occur. There would be a good chance that the USSR would at some point provide -- for the defense of North Vietnam -- some new weapons systems with additional range and firepower. We would not exclude the surfacing of some Soviet military personnel in a "volunteer" role. Such increased Chinese and Soviet support would probably reinforce North Vietnam's determination to persevere.

Course D: A similar bombing program including the effective interdiction of North Vietnamese harbors.

15. The most important additional effect of this course would be to pose a direct challenge to the USSR. The Soviets would have three broad options: they could attempt to counter US interdiction by their own naval forces, bring pressure on the US in some other area (say, Berlin), or accept the necessity of relying primarily on rail transport across China to support Hanoi. They probably would regard the first option as not militarily feasible and much too hazardous in any case. The second might seem somewhat more attractive, but still highly risky and uncertain. The third seems by all odds the most likely. But the USSR would also want to take some vigorous diplomatic action to condemn the US in the UN, to raise international alarms, and to convince the US that relations with the USSR were coming to a dangerous pass.

16. A principal political effect would be to place China in a commanding position. Peking would not only control the remaining lines of supply, but its influence in Hanoi would almost certainly increase at the expense of the USSR. The main thrust of China's growing leverage and influence would be directed toward persuading Hanoi to

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continue the fight. To this end the Chinese would still have to permit Soviet supplies to pass through, and would themselves have to make it clearer to Hanoi what military actions China would take to support the regime if the bombing and mining seriously weakened economic and political controls throughout North Vietnam.

17. It is conceivable that as a result of intensive bombing and the interdiction of the harbors, the situation in North Vietnam would slowly deteriorate to the point that Hanoi felt it necessary to change its policies. We cannot estimate in advance how much Hanoi might be willing to absorb, though we think it unlikely that the bombing and mining program would create such pressures that Hanoi would choose to negotiate or otherwise terminate the war. In any case, the critical factors would be Hanoi's view of Communist prospects in the South and its assessment of world reaction to the new escalation signaled by the mining.

Effects of Certain Courses or Combinations

18. It is possible that one of the above courses of increased military pressures or a combination of them would persuade Hanoi that its military and political situation as a whole and in particular the prospects for success in the war in the South were deteriorating seriously. At this juncture, the attitudes of their allies might become critical for the North Vietnamese. The Chinese would no doubt urge them to carry on, perhaps by returning to guerrilla war in the South. We think it unlikely that the Chinese would offer, or the Vietnamese accept, open intervention by Chinese forces in South Vietnam. We think there would be a good chance that at this phase the Soviets would strongly urge Hanoi to move toward a political settlement, although we do not think the Soviets would apply any sort of sanction to compel Hanoi. As for how Hanoi would respond to the advice it might receive from its allies at this point, we think no responsible judgment is now possible; our inclination is to believe that Hanoi might take both, i.e., negotiate and try to keep a guerrilla action going in the South.

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19. On the other hand, Hanoi could as well go in another direction. In the past we have estimated that a number of responses which the North Vietnamese might make were unlikely because they would raise the chances of further and more damaging US retaliation. At some point, however, these restraints might be abandoned, if the North Vietnamese felt that the US was determined to destroy North Vietnam. Thus, Hanoi might try to attack carriers and other naval ships, increase military pressures and their own role in northern Laos and perhaps northeast Thailand, step up assassinations and urban terrorism in South Vietnam and perhaps even begin attacking US bases with weapons from sites in North Vietnam. The purpose of such actions might be not so much to affect the military situation as to precipitate more favorable terms for a negotiation.

Effects of Restricting US Bombing to Southern North Vietnam

20. Communist reaction to this move would depend to a great extent on the timing and on what other US actions accompanied or followed it. In certain circumstances it occurred, Hanoi and Peking would probably attribute the shift in bombing policy to international opinion and to domestic US criticism, and thus see it as confirming their view that the US would not persist in a long struggle. This interpretation might be dispelled if the US could make it clear that the bombing was being redirected in an effort to raise the cost of moving men and supplies into South Vietnam. But it would be even a more effective move if the reduction occurred after the US had indicated an intention to increase its force in South Vietnam and perhaps to take other actions to block or reduce North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos.

21. In this latter case, Hanoi's reaction might then depend on the diplomatic moves which the US undertook and especially the formula being offered for negotiations. We cannot say whether Hanoi would in fact be prepared to move toward negotiations. At a minimum, however, they would have to recognize that the redirection of the bombing program would

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probably reduce criticism and pressures in the US and abroad, thus strengthening the chances that the US could and would persist for a long time. If the moves occurred after the US buildup of additional forces began, the North Vietnamese might interpret the move as a US attempt to allow Hanoi a way out of the military impasse and to move toward negotiations. In that case, the formula then being offered for negotiations would largely determine Hanoi's response.

22. The Soviets would probably be more disposed than Hanoi to view the US move as an effort to bring about a settlement, and far less likely to consider it a mark of failing US resolve. Accordingly, they would probably advise Hanoi to probe the US position, looking toward possible negotiations. However, the USSR would not be likely to put much pressure on Hanoi to respond.

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