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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 March 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Communist Reactions to Certain US Courses of Action

I. COMMUNIST VIEWS OF THE PRESENT SITUATION

Hanoi and the VC

1. It is clear that the Vietnamese Communists are engaged in a major and continuing offensive. They are currently making a vigorous effort to replace their losses, form and train new VC units, resupply and re-equip their forces and reposition large units in preparation for another more intensive phase sometime within the next few months. Their principal objectives are to destroy the GVN's authority in much of the country; also to reduce the ARVN's effectiveness and to inflict defeats on US forces in battles in the northern I Corps. The net result, they hope, will be a political and military situation which will destroy the political basis for the US presence and thus lead the US to open negotiations

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for a settlement of the war on terms favorable to the Communists. While they are not likely to be committed to specific timetables, they clearly hope their effort will yield decisive results this year.

2. Judging from Hanoi's overt propaganda, it has allowed for the possibility that the US response to the offensive will be to increase its own troop strengths, to intensify bombing of North Vietnam, and possibly to exert further pressures such as the mining of Haiphong harbor. Hanoi apparently believes that none of these measures is likely to prevent Communist forces from sustaining their offensive and expects that before US counter-measures can be fully implemented the political base in South Vietnam will have disintegrated beyond retrieval.

3. Peking. China has more or less openly warned that Hanoi must still be prepared to persist in a prolonged war, since the US, facing ultimate defeat, will react viciously and intensify pressures in both South and North Vietnam. The Chinese have also displayed some nervousness that Hanoi will negotiate prematurely. At the same time, the Chinese have reiterated their pledges of assistance, though without making any specific commitments.

- 2 -

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The USSR

4. Since the end of 1964 Moscow has supported the Communist effort in South Vietnam. At times there have been indications that Moscow preferred to see greater reliance on a political rather than a military route to victory, but there is no persuasive evidence that the Soviets ever attempted to bring strong pressure to bear on Hanoi over this. They have felt that they would lose more from failing to support Hanoi than from the deterioration in Soviet-US relations that such support involved. And they have argued, for American ears, that it is US and not Soviet policy that has inhibited constructive developments in these relations.

5. What appears more recently to be some hardening in Moscow's attitude on the Vietnam situation probably results from the war's intensification, but, more important, reflects a view that Hanoi's success is becoming more certain. The Soviets would wish to manifest fullest identification with Hanoi in that case. It may be also that for purposes of any role they may play in future negotiations with the US they would wish to establish a tough position. While they probably recognize that the likelihood of their involvement may rise as the struggle approaches a climactic phase, it does not appear that they have ever rated this risk as

- 3 -

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very high, primarily because US objectives have been so clearly limited to the defense of South Vietnam. When and if US actions impinge more severely on North Vietnam, Soviet attitudes may change. These circumstances are dealt with in Part II.

II. US COURSES OF ACTION

Course A

The US would make an early announcement of additional reinforcements for Vietnam on the order of 25,000 men, coupled with reserve calls and other measures to (1) make an additional 75,000 men available later, or (2) make an additional 175,000 men available.

In either case, bombing of North Vietnam would be stepped up as the weather improved and would include some new targets, but not the mining of Haiphong or major attacks in the urban areas of Hanoi or Haiphong.

Hanoi's Reaction

a. To US Reinforcement

6. North Vietnamese leaders expect to confront larger US forces and current Communist strategy probably allows for it. As long ago as the summer of 1966, they predicted that US troop levels would eventually reach 600,000 or even 750,000. Thus, the North Vietnamese would regard an immediate US reinforcement of 25,000

- 4 -

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men as little more than a token gesture. By heavy infiltration, Hanoi has already increased the number of Communist maneuver battalions in South Vietnam from about 150 last fall to about 190 at present.* North Vietnam still has the capability to meet the additional US combat battalions included in any total reinforcement of 100,000, and would probably deploy the additional forces necessary to do so.

7. Hanoi would recognize, however, that a total US reinforcement of 100,000 and especially 200,000 represented a deeper political and psychological commitment, since either would involve call-up of sizable reserves and a partial mobilization. Hanoi would have to consider that, if its current efforts to gain a decisive advantage failed, the war would probably continue for some considerable period and at higher levels of combat and losses. The North Vietnamese might in such circumstances give more serious thought to early negotiations, calculating that the political situation in the US and uncertainties in Saigon in the wake of the Tet offensive provided favorable auspices for negotiations. They might think also that a peace move at this

* This does not include all the independent companies and platoons in South Vietnam.

- 5 -

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juncture would be enough to collapse the GVN. On balance, however, we think it more likely that Hanoi would continue the war, providing what additional forces in the South seemed necessary to maintain or intensify its military effort.

8. The proposed US troop increases would be implemented between now and December. Within 90 days Hanoi could deploy two divisions to South Vietnam, thus adding 18 maneuver battalions. By December at least one more infantry division (9 battalions) could be added. Such movements are within current capacities of the infiltration corridors and supply routes. A US reinforcement of 200,000 men would add 27 maneuver battalions to allied strength and bring the US total to 133 as against a possible 208-217 for the NVA/VC in South Vietnam.* Given its present estimate of ARVN's likely effectiveness, Hanoi would probably regard this ratio as sufficient to prevent the US from significantly improving on its present situation. It is unlikely that Hanoi would regard the dispatch of 2-3 more divisions to South Vietnam as involving unacceptable risks to home defense.

* US Army battalions have about 900 men and USMC 1350; NVA battalions average about 400-500.

- 6 -

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To Increased Bombing

9. An increased weight of bombing attacks on North Vietnamese industrial and transportation targets would have no significant effect on North Vietnamese capabilities or determination, given the assumption that this course does not include major urban attacks in Hanoi and Haiphong, or the mining of the latter. We believe that North Vietnam would still be able to support the war in the South, even at the higher levels caused by the postulated US reinforcements.

10. China and the USSR. We do not see that these courses of action would have any major effect on Soviet or Chinese policy. Neither would regard the commitment of additional US troops as a development to which it had to respond directly. If requested, Peking would be willing to provide additional manpower for various tasks in North Vietnam. As for the USSR, it might provide some more sophisticated types of defensive equipment (coastal defense missiles, new type of fighters, SAMs, and AAA).

- 7 -

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Course B

Troop increases as indicated in Course A would be accompanied by the mining of Haiphong and/or significantly intensified bombing of urban targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas.*

11. General. Mining of Haiphong and intensified bombing would ultimately magnify the problems of maintaining the flow of military and economic goods to North Vietnam. An effective mining program could put the major burden on the road and rail systems from China which would, in turn, become more lucrative bombing targets. For at least the next several months, there would be little impact on the military situation in South Vietnam. But given a considerably higher level of combat in the South, the deployment of more NVA units and the commitment of more US troops, there might be some point at which Hanoi's ability to provide essential military support in the South would decline. We cannot foresee when this might occur, especially in view of Hanoi's demonstrated capability to improvise its logistical support and its ability to modify its own tactics to conserve or expend

* There are about 46 targets not yet attacked in the Hanoi area, including railway yards, the Hanoi Machinery Plant and some other industrial facilities. There are about 22 potential targets in the Haiphong area, including the rail yards, docks and warehouse areas near the port.

- 8 -

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resources. In any case, logistical limitations are not likely to be such that Hanoi would be compelled to change its general military strategy.

12. Intensified bombing alone would not be likely to lead to a major change in Hanoi's strategy or the direct involvement of China and the USSR. There is a risk in these circumstances that the North Vietnamese Air Force might become more dependent on the use of China as a sanctuary. In addition, of course, bombing in the Hanoi and Haiphong area would cause greater civilian casualties and therefore much more international criticism and opposition.

13. Hanoi. If in addition Haiphong were mined, the major immediate impact on Hanoi would be psychological. Especially in combination with a 200,000 troop increase, it would convey a US determination to persevere despite possible political repercussions at home and abroad. Hanoi would probably expect that the United States, having accepted the risks involved in challenging the USSR by mining Haiphong, would sooner or later expand the war to Laos and Cambodia and perhaps ultimately into a ground attack on North Vietnam. It would seek more assistance

- 9 -

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from Moscow and China, and would maintain its pressures in Laos. But it would probably still believe that the GVN/ARVN could be virtually demolished before all the US actions could become totally effective. Accordingly it would probably continue and if possible intensify its military effort in the South in order to accomplish this end. As long as it saw a chance of success, we believe Hanoi would not elect to begin serious negotiations.

14. Sino-Soviet Relations. Mining would impose a greater burden on the rail lines from China which already carry the bulk of military supplies and would thus test anew Sino-Soviet cooperation in maintaining the movement of supplies to North Vietnam. Apparently, the movement of Soviet goods across China has been proceeding fairly well since last year's agreement, under which Hanoi has assumed some responsibility for transshipment once Soviet goods reached the Chinese frontier. The mining would increase Hanoi's dependence on China, but Peking would be unlikely to disrupt transit of Soviet military supplies.

15. China would probably also assist in developing alternative means of delivery for North Vietnam. For example, the port of Changchiang (Fort Bayard) might be expanded to receive supplies

- 10 -

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destined for overland movement to Hanoi. And China would provide smaller vessels to use in coastal shipping to North Vietnam.

16. The USSR. The most critical question is Moscow's response. It would greatly lessen the risk of trouble with the USSR if the mining were concentrated on blocking the Canal Maritime, which would only prevent entry to the docks. In this case, lightering would still be possible from ships anchored in the roadstead, and Soviet seaborne supplies would not be denied to Hanoi. The port would not be put out of commission, though its operation would be greatly complicated. Politically, however, the challenge would still appear much the same.

17. The Soviets would probably provide and if necessary operate minesweepers. This would be intended as a political demonstration to deter the US from continuing this course, as well as an attempt to assist in maintaining a flow of at least some traffic. Soviet merchant ships calling at Haiphong would probably be armed with AAA in these circumstances. Soviet ships, however, would not deliberately risk running the minefield. The Soviets would probably also provide still more air defense

- 11 -

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equipment for Haiphong (perhaps the SA-3 system) not only to protect against the intensified bombing but to make it as costly as possible to maintain the minefields. We do not believe, however, that there would be any offensive action by Soviet military forces in the area, though in actual practice Soviet personnel might be manning defensive systems.

18. The mining of Haiphong would offer a clear challenge to the Soviet Union. Moreover, in the course of this operation or the bombing of the Haiphong docks there would be considerable likelihood of damage or destruction of a Soviet ship and killing Soviet personnel. Therefore, of all actions other than invasion of North Vietnam, mining would be most likely to cause the Soviets to consider serious acts of retaliation against the US. Such acts would be most likely to be effective in areas outside Southeast Asia. If the mining proved effective the pressures on Moscow to take some counteraction might grow.

19. We still estimate, however, that the Soviets are likely to stop short of precipitating a major confrontation with the US. Their stake in the outcome in South Vietnam is not so great that they would deliberately run extremely high

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risks. There is no readymade situation, including Berlin, where they could have much assurance that their action would force the United States to give way in Vietnam.

20. But this does not mean that the Soviets would not react in other ways. Their stance would become tougher in general and on specific issues. They might retaliate by freezing certain issues or suspending certain negotiations in order to demonstrate against the United States. They would certainly try to add to international criticism and exploit it against the United States. In short, as a consequence of the mining of Haiphong, US-Soviet relations would almost certainly be characterized by an air of crisis.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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Chairman.

- 13 -

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