

Memo

Reactions to a US Course of Action

20 February 1969

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

20 February 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Reactions to a US Course of Action

THE PROBLEM

To estimate various reactions to US air and/or ground attacks against VC base areas in Cambodia.

ASSUMPTIONS

A. The VC/NVA Forces launch major offensives against urban areas including Saigon, Hue, and Danang.

B. In retaliation, US air and/or ground forces attack several identified VC base areas in Cambodia.

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1. The reactions of world opinion and of the various parties directly concerned would be primarily determined by the general context in which the attacks against Cambodia occurred: whether they were accompanied by other US actions pointing to a severe escalation of the war and a major change in US policy, or whether they appeared as isolated and limited acts of retaliation. In addition, Sihanouk's response would be largely governed by the location and duration of the operations in Cambodian territory.

2. Cambodian reaction. Sihanouk appears presently inclined to warm up his relations with the US, and will probably react positively to the recent US initiatives, doubtless with some bargaining. He may have begun to hedge his bets on the outcome in Vietnam, or at least to change his views on the length of time it will take the Communists to achieve their objectives. Retaliatory attacks on targets in Cambodia in the near future would therefore come at a delicate juncture in US relations with that country.

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3. If the attacks were directed against bases in populated areas, or conducted over a wide area or repeatedly, they would wreck any chance of reconciliation with Sihanouk for some time to come. Whether or not the US Government announced its action, it could not take place on any considerable scale without being made public knowledge by the press and radio. [redacted]

4. Yet Sihanouk is not eager to exacerbate his relations with the US. There is a good chance that one or two US air strikes in the remote and virtually unpopulated areas of the northeast part of Cambodia would evoke no more than a perfunctory protest from him; he might even ignore them altogether. He could not ignore or fail to protest a strike delivered in the populated area of the south, where several of the Communist bases are located. And he would have to react if the Communists made vociferous propaganda about the attack, wherever it was delivered.

5. Ground operations would appear as a more serious violation of Cambodian territory. They would run a considerable risk of involving Cambodian forces in clashes with US troops. Sihanouk

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would also be distressed and angered by the prospect of having VC/NVA forces withdrawing more deeply into his territory. He could do little to stop this and would blame the US for his predicament. He might take his case to the UN and would certainly try to activate the ICC to expose the US transgressions.

6. North Vietnamese and VC Reaction. The Vietnamese Communists would expect to pay some price for attacking South Vietnamese cities and thereby violating the "understanding" made at the time the bombing of North Vietnam was stopped; they would probably anticipate some air strikes against the North, and would be prepared to accept an interruption of the Paris talks. They have almost certainly taken account of such possibilities, and an intensive assault on major South Vietnamese cities would indicate that they believed the potential impact of their offensive would more than offset possible US military retaliation.

7. The Communists could be hurt militarily, depending on the scale and duration of the US attacks, and especially on the extent to which ground action was involved. They would recognize that the US had changed its policy significantly, that it was

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willing to take new action as necessary to support its military position, and that it was no longer confined by past restrictions.

8. On the other hand, the Communists would see propaganda advantages in claims that the US was expanding the scale and area of conflict, endangering the Paris peace talks, violating Cambodian sovereignty, and killing civilians in a country claiming to be neutral. They would certainly press these considerations on the attention of world opinion.

9. The Paris talks. The postulated attacks, in the context of Communist attacks on South Vietnamese cities, would raise the noise level of the exchanges in Paris. But we do not think that because of these attacks the Communists would break off the Paris talks for good, though they might threaten to do so, or perhaps bring about a temporary suspension of meetings in an effort to rally world opinion against the US and US domestic opinion against the government. Hanoi would indeed probably calculate that US attacks on Cambodian territory, with their attendant publicity, would increase US domestic pressures for an early end to the war.

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10. The GVN. There is a good chance that vigorous Communist attacks on Saigon and other major cities in South Vietnam would prompt the GVN to walk out of the Paris talks. Its disposition to do so, or to demand that the US break off the talks, would be diminished by a US retaliatory attack on Communist bases in Cambodia.

11. China and the USSR would join vigorously in the Cambodian and North Vietnamese propaganda assault on the US. Peking would welcome the prospect that negotiations might break down and heavier fighting be renewed. Moscow would be disturbed by the turn of events but would probably judge that the US merely meant to make a strong response to an attack on Saigon, and was still primarily interested in seeing an early conclusion to the war. It would probably use its influence to prevent any complete breakdown of the Paris talks.

12. Other Reactions. Clearly the world at large -- except for the Chinese Communist -- hopes that the war in Vietnam will soon end. There would be widespread disappointment and disapproval of further escalation of the fighting, and of the extension of it into new areas. We are assuming, however, that US attacks would

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be in retaliation for a substantial previous escalation by Communist forces. If the Communist attacks on cities were on a large scale and produced destructive results, the US would not be solely blamed for the new development. There would be a great deal of criticism, of appeals to the US to exercise restraint, to refrain from an extended campaign in Cambodian territory, and to make a new effort in the Paris talks. Various governments would probably lend support to Cambodia's cause in the UN; some would try to bring about formal UN condemnation of the US action. In short, we do not believe that the postulated US action could be undertaken on any very effective scale without political repercussions.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES: 25X1A

[redacted]
ABBOT SMITH
Chairman

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