

Memo

**Reactions to a US Course of
Action in Vietnam**

21 April 1965

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MEMORANDUM ON REACTIONS TO A US COURSE OF ACTION IN VIETNAM

NOTE

This memorandum was coordinated with senior officers of State/INR, DIA, and CIA (ONE and OCI). As of the time of completion, we have not secured the views of Mr. Hughes (INR) and General Carroll (DIA).

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MEMORANDUM (Revised Text)

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist and general world reactions to a US course of action in Vietnam, stated below, over the next six to twelve months.

ASSUMPTIONS

We assume that the scale and tempo of US air action against North Vietnam and against the Viet Cong in South Vietnam continues at present levels for the period of this estimate. We also assume that, within the next few months, additional US military forces are introduced into South Vietnam to bring the total US military present there to approximately 30,000 and that these forces will have, as part of their mission, ground combat against Viet Cong troops. We also assume that approximately 5,250 Allied non-US combat forces are introduced.

DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Present Situation. At present it appears that the DRV, with strong Chinese encouragement, is determined for the present to ride out the US bombardment. The Viet Cong, the DRV, and Communist

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China have hardened their attitudes toward negotiations, without categorically excluding the possibility under all conditions. They still consider that the tide is running in favor of the VC, despite the bombings in the South. They apparently calculate that the DRV can afford further punishment and that, in the meantime, US determination to persist will weaken because of the pressure of international and US domestic opinion, the threat of a broader conflict, and increasing DRV air defense capabilities.

2. The Soviets have exhibited increased concern about the trend of events, and Moscow has indicated a greater interest in negotiations than the other Communists involved. Nevertheless, the others have thus far rejected Moscow's efforts in this direction. In these circumstances the Soviets have been taking a series of steps, each of which increases their involvement and commitment, in an effort to vie with the Chinese as supporters of North Vietnam and the VC's "national liberation struggle." Soviet SAMs are almost certainly on the way, and the recent Soviet-DRV communique suggests that agreement has been reached on other forms of military assistance as well.

3. Non-Communist opinions are influenced primarily by two factors: fears that the war will spread beyond Vietnam, and judgments as to the relative chances of the two sides. On the first point, fears of a larger war are presently not high, but they lie fairly near

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the surface and work largely against the US. On the second, most world opinion judges that political weakness in Saigon, the success of Viet Cong guerrilla tactics, and the ground predominance of China will eventually lead to Communist victory. Another factor, one which works in the US favor, is the priority which some governments, notably the UK and Australia, attach to maintaining solidarity with the US in Southeast Asia.

Reactions to A Continuation of Present Courses of Action

4. If present US policies continue without the introduction of large additional forces or increased US air effort, the Communists are likely to hold to their existing policy of seeking victory in the local military struggle in South Vietnam. They will try to intensify that struggle, supporting it with additional men and equipment. At the same time, DRV air defenses will be strengthened through Soviet and perhaps Chinese aid. So long as the trend in South Vietnam appears to the Communists to be favorable, however, we doubt that they will open new fronts in Indochina, launch an overt invasion of South Vietnam, or challenge the US in the air in the southern part of the DRV.

5. As to the course of the struggle in South Vietnam itself, in these circumstances we think it unlikely that the Viet Cong and its supporters will come to believe that they can no longer support

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the war and must make concessions extending beyond the superficial in order to end it. They are more likely to believe that they are prevailing or at least holding their own.

6. If these estimates are correct, then some changes in world opinion are likely over the next six to twelve months we are here considering. Fears of a larger war would probably decline, but the conviction of ultimate Communist victory would be strengthened with the passage of time. Under these circumstances, therefore, the outlook is for a decline in support for the US, although the change might not be very great.

II. REACTIONS TO THE ASSUMED GREATER US INVOLVEMENT

7. The assumed US course of action would require the Communists to re-examine their estimates of US intentions. As the buildup of US and other foreign forces became clear, both Communist and non-Communist opinion would probably conclude that the US had taken a firm decision not to accept a military defeat in South Vietnam. Most of those who believed that US policy sought merely to create the minimal conditions for a face-saving withdrawal would abandon this belief. Many people, and in particular the Chinese, might believe that this US decision could be undone at a

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later stage, but all would perceive at least a temporary re-affirmation and strengthening of the US commitment. However, as it became apparent that US operations against the DRV were still being conducted on a limited basis, without maximum use of air and naval power, the Communists would be likely to conclude that US determination to prevail had not yet overcome its concern to prevent a widening of the war.

Initial Communist Reactions

8. In the circumstances thus created, the Communists might reason that military victory would now become very difficult or perhaps even unattainable. They might think this, not because they expected the new enemy forces rapidly to reverse the tide of battle, but because they feared they would be unable to continue a series of successful local operations and thereby to maintain the morale of the Viet Cong in a prolonged struggle. Additionally, they might infer from the increased US commitment that, if a stalemate persisted, the chances of a subsequent US resort to more aggressive actions were greater.

9. Alternatively, the Communists might reason that the new enemy forces would serve only to postpone the ultimate Communist

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victory. In this, they would be counting on such factors as the capabilities of the Viet Cong, the known aversion to "getting bogged down" in a land war in Asia, the political vulnerability of the Saigon Government, the pressures of world and domestic US opinion, and the evident unwillingness, at least thus far, of the US to expand the conflict by bombing northern North Vietnam.

10. Although there would be differences among them in general we believe that the Viet Cong, North Vietnam, and China would initially respond along the second of these lines of reasoning. Accordingly, they would probably try to offset the new enemy strength by stepping up the insurgency, reinforcing the Viet Cong as-necessary with the men and equipment necessary. They would likely count on time being on their side and try to force the piecemeal engagement of US troops under conditions which might bog them down in jungle warfare, hoping to present the US with a de facto partition of the country. The Soviet Union would be more inclined to the first line of reasoning but, unless unforeseen events had in the meantime produced a major change in post-Khrushchev policy, the USSR would almost certainly acquiesce in a decision by Hanoi to intensify the struggle.

11. There is a third possibility: that Hanoi and Peiping would choose the arrival of major new US forces as the moment for a general showdown. This could involve a large-scale invasion of South Vietnam by DRV troops, movements of Chinese forces into the DRV, and movements of DRV and/or Chinese troops into northern Laos or beyond. We do not believe, however, that they would react in

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this fashion, at least until they had had a chance to observe how the US intervention had affected the course of the war.

Communist Reactions at a Later Stage

12. Subsequent Communist reactions would depend upon the subsequent course of the struggle in South Vietnam. We cannot estimate how that struggle would evolve after new anti-Communist forces had arrived and the Viet Cong had in turn received new support. In general, however, we believe that the Viet Cong, the DRV, and China all rate the staying power of their side as inherently superior to that of their enemies. But the critical factor will be whether these beliefs are proved in combat validated in terms of the tides of battle, the casualties, and other indicators with US and SVN forces over another six to twelve months of fighting.

13. If the Communists concluded that the Viet Cong's military prospects had seriously worsened, in spite of the reinforcements noted in paragraph 10 as a result of the US intervention and military successes then they would face a choice between taking steps to interrupt the conflict or shifting to a large-scale ground offensive along the lines of paragraph 11. In weighing these alternatives, we think they would recognize that by committing ground forces to offensive operations, the US had acquired a greater stake in the war. Moreover, they would probably also recognize that the chances of overrunning South Vietnam in

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overt military operations had receded, and that if they tried to do this against large US forces, the US probably would not accept defeat without expanding the war to the DRV and China, perhaps using nuclear weapons. Thus, we think that, if and when this point is reached, the chances are somewhat better than even that the DRV and China would resort to political moves would seek at least a temporary political solution for a time rather than launch a major ground invasion.

14. The USSR is less concerned than the other Communist states to defeat the US in South Vietnam. Its chief motive is to prevent such a defeat from redounding to Chinese credit and its own discredit, to uphold its claims to leadership of the "socialist camp" and the "national liberation movement." These concerns provide Hanoi with considerable leverage over Moscow, and the USSR would probably provide general support and specialized military assistance to the DRV in any of the various levels of conflict here envisaged. But we note that the present level of Soviet involvement in Southeast Asia is a recent policy departure which reverses Khrushchev's tendency toward disengagement, and it is therefore possible that a sharp increase in risk might cause the USSR to revert to a more aloof posture.

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Initial and Subsequent Non-Communist Reactions

15. Perhaps the most important non-Communist reactions would be those of the South Vietnamese. These reactions would probably be somewhat ambivalent, that is, On the one hand they would be considerably encouraged on the one hand but tending by the increased US support; on the other, there would be some tendency, with the passage of time, to relax efforts on the other because someone else would now do the fighting. The introduction of large numbers of US troops might lend credence to charges that the US had colonialist ambitions in Vietnam and cause a rise in popular support for the VC. The key determinant, however, would be the effectiveness of the total US effort. If this produced a slackening of VC pressures, US-South Vietnamese working relations would be fairly smooth. If, on the contrary, the war looked as if it would drag on with no particular respite from DRV/VC pressures, South Vietnamese war weariness and anti-Americanism would probably begin to threaten the US political base in South Vietnam.

16. There would be wide variations, ranging from very positive to very negative, in the reactions of the other non-Communist nations to the US course of action assumed here. However, their declarations and moves would, for the most part, tend to be unimportant, since only a few can have, or even hope to have, any noticeable influence on the countries most directly involved in Vietnam. The ultimate

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effect of developments in Vietnam on US relations with the bulk of these countries would continue to be determined by the eventual success or failure of US policy there and by the degree to which any individual country found itself becoming more deeply embroiled in the conflict.

17. Major NATO allies, such as Great Britain, West Germany, Canada, and Italy, which have heretofore largely supported US actions, would be almost certain initially to continue this posture. However, their concern at this further evidence of US willingness to enlarge its commitment, and at the implications for further escalation later on, would enhance existing desires for a negotiated settlement. While Rome and Bonn would be likely to remain passive, London and Ottawa would probably press Washington privately to show greater willingness to start talks with the Communists, while avoiding additional escalating actions, and also devise schemes for a de facto cease-fire or ultimate settlement. Nevertheless, both countries would go very far to avoid an open break with the US and to maintain their lines of communication to US policymakers.

18. Such allies as France and Pakistan, which are already negatively oriented to US policies in Vietnam, would deplore the

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assumed course of action, predict its failure, and step up their moves to mobilize world pressure, primarily on the US, but also on the Communists, to move to the conference table. India's reaction would be similar, though perhaps even more vocally hostile to the US. India and France might also seek to work out joint positions or even new initiatives with the USSR, but Pakistan may be more wary of such actions in view of Ayub's recent rebuff in Moscow and of the vulnerability of newly-established ties between Peiping and Karachi.

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