

**Memo**

**Communist Reactions to Certain  
US Courses of Action**

**6 February 1967**

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

6 February 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US COURSES OF ACTION

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the probable reactions of North Vietnam, China, and the USSR to the following air campaigns against North Vietnam:

- I. A PHASED STEP-UP IN US ACTIONS CONSISTING OF
  - A. Airstrikes against 20 modern industrial targets in North Vietnam, followed by
  - B. Mining of North Vietnamese harbors to prevent:
    - (1) use of deep-draft ships only
    - (2) use of both deep-draft and shallow-draft ships.In both cases, we assume intensive armed reconnaissance against LOCs and transport targets, followed by

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C. Airstrikes against the levees in the Red River Delta, followed by

D. Unlimited attacks against the transportation system, the airfields and certain minor military targets, and miscellaneous industrial and repair facilities.

II. A PROGRAM OF DEESCALATION BY RESTRICTING US BOMBING TO THE "LOGISTIC FUNNEL," i.e., ROUTE PACKAGES ONE AND TWO IN SOUTHERN NORTH VIETNAM, AND LAOS.

None of the above would call for the use of nuclear weapons or for airstrikes any closer to the border of Communist China than at present.

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DISCUSSION

I. REACTIONS TO A PHASED STEP-UP IN US ACTIONS

General Considerations

1. This program would constitute a progressive, vigorous and clearly apparent escalation of the US bombing of North Vietnam. The Communists and the world at large would be convinced that it reflected a basic change of US policy and objectives, especially if the moves were initiated at a time when there seemed to be movement toward negotiations or compromise. The Communists would thus be reacting not only to each specific action, but also to the general change in US posture. Hence the next four paragraphs discuss Communist reactions to the program in general; the later paragraphs deal with specific points involved in each phase of the program.

2. Throughout the campaign international opinion would be an important general factor. It may be taken for granted that there would be an accentuation of Communist propaganda about the

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inhuman nature of the US action. Receptivity to such charges would be increased in the non-Communist world, the more so as there would be growing alarm over the possible expansion of the war to China and even the USSR. We think it certain the Soviets, or some other country, would bring the matter to the UN, where the US would be severely and extensively criticized and perhaps formally censured.

3. Communist reactions would be largely influenced by the condition of China, the state of Sino-Soviet tensions, North Vietnam's judgment of its own capabilities, and the military and political situation in South Vietnam. To some extent, the Communists, especially Hanoi, might also be influenced by the manner in which the US conducted the campaign, its duration, and any political moves by the US that would accompany it.

4. The physical as well as the political effects of the campaign would be cumulative. As the impact of each successive stage became fully apparent, Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi would be continually reviewing their own situation, international reactions, and US intentions. We cannot say at which point, if any, each of them might feel compelled to reconsider basic policies and options, and they might reach different estimates at different stages.

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5. The major questions are these:

a. Would the program constrain North Vietnam to negotiate or otherwise to end the fighting? Obviously it would make it increasingly difficult for North Vietnam simply to persist in its present course. The North Vietnamese leaders would be concerned over the increasing destruction of their country and the effect of this on their people, and they would be increasingly apprehensive that the US would invade the North. More immediate factors in their decision would be the course of military and political developments in South Vietnam, and their estimate of the condition and policies of China: on the one hand, whether the Peiping regime appeared stable enough to rely on for long-term assistance, including the transit of Soviet aid; on the other, whether Hanoi was becoming dependent on China to the point of political subservience. We cannot say with much confidence what conclusion Hanoi would draw from these factors. Hanoi might decide to take whatever political steps it deemed necessary to halt the bombing. But in the near term we think it more likely that the North Vietnamese would decide to continue the war.

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b. Would this program bring Communist China or the USSR or both into open military conflict with the US? We think not; we are fairly confident with respect to the USSR, but not so confident with respect to China. Reasons of geography and logistics virtually rule out the intervention of significant Soviet armed forces in Southeast Asia. As for China, that country is currently in such a state of disorder that its reactions are largely unpredictable. Yet we do not believe that China would enter the war with ground forces in Southeast Asia, or even with its air force acting from Chinese bases. A major exception to this estimate, however, is a situation in which China believed the North Vietnamese state was disintegrating or that an invasion of North Vietnam was imminent.

c. Would the need to cooperate in further support of North Vietnam draw the USSR and China closer together? We do not expect that the movement of the Vietnam war into a new phase would operate to improve relations between Moscow and Peiping. The stepped-up US effort may impel the Chinese to somewhat greater cooperation than heretofore in seeing that Soviet supplies move forward to North Vietnam, since neither of them wishes to appear

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responsible for impeding that flow. But Sino-Soviet differences are so deep and relations so abrasive that at best serious delays in shipments will probably occur.

d. Would it cause the Soviets to pressure North Vietnam into some sort of approach to the US which would end the fighting? The embarrassment the Soviets would feel over their inability to protect North Vietnam, and the increased risks involved in providing effective aid, would probably dispose them to a more active search for peace than they have been willing to undertake so far. At some stage, they might urge Hanoi to seek a political settlement. Yet, the Soviets would probably also be unwilling to run the political risk of putting serious pressure on Hanoi, say by making their continued aid conditional on moves toward negotiations.

e. Would it cause the North Vietnamese to react with hitherto untried enterprises -- attacks on US carriers, or air attacks on airfields or other targets in South Vietnam? We doubt it, because the chances of substantial success would be small, especially in attacking a US carrier, and the effect of such attacks would probably not be thought worth the cost which might be expected from US retaliation. Yet the possibility exists, and the odds

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would rise in the later stages of the US air campaign. At some point the North Vietnamese might feel they had little left to lose.

f. Would North Vietnam retaliate by a major invasion of Laos or South Vietnam? Probably not, mainly because the fear of an invasion of North Vietnam would still be a potent deterrent. But this attitude might change if Hanoi came to believe that a US invasion was the inevitable climax of the bombing campaign.

g. Would it cause the Soviets to react by vigorous pressures against US interests elsewhere in the world? Of course Soviet policy toward the US would harden. However, there are in fact few places where the Soviets could exert such pressures. They would be unlikely to do so in Berlin; this would undercut the general policy they have been pursuing in Europe, especially toward France. Moreover, they would see considerable advantages to be gained in Europe and elsewhere by exploiting antipathy to the US actions and emphasizing that the US was reckless and aggressive.

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COURSE A: Air Strikes Against Major Industrial Targets

6. General. The Communists have apparently been unsure whether the US planned to intensify the bombing campaign or to keep it limited. The airstrikes would convince them that the US had opted for escalation, though they would still not be sure of how much or how soon. Since many of these targets are in heavily populated areas, the attacks would probably involve greater destruction of civilian life and property. Hence, in anticipation that such themes would be echoed by most of the Free World, the Communists would denounce the US move by stressing the civilian nature of the targets and the civilian casualties.

7. North Vietnam. North Vietnam has probably already discounted the effect of an attack on the country's industrial base, in large part because industry is not essential for the country's survival. Moreover, Hanoi would assume -- almost certainly correctly -- that increased imports from the USSR and Communist China could provide the supplies to sustain the war effort. North Vietnam, nonetheless, would probably make a maximum air defense effort, and this could substantially increase the air war over North Vietnam.

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8. China and the USSR. This particular action by the US would not cause any significant change in Moscow's or Peiping's policies. Peiping would be willing to add to its logistic and antiaircraft troops already in North Vietnam. Both China and the USSR would try to compensate for the losses suffered by North Vietnam by providing military and economic aid. But how much assistance could be provided would depend on how soon the US began the mining, as well as on the political and physical problems of shipping across China.

COURSE B: Mining of the Harbors

9. General. The three Communist countries concerned would view the mining as a major escalation of the war; this might be the stage at which they concluded that the US had abandoned hope of an early negotiation and was intent on increasing military pressures even at substantial political cost to itself. They would see this course of action as particularly alarming to much of the Free World and would make a special effort to exploit adverse reactions. It is probably at this point that a UN condemnation of the US would be sought, either by neutrals or by the USSR and East Europeans.

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10. North Vietnam. The mining would be a jolt to Hanoi, even though it has already anticipated such a possibility. It has little capacity to deal with the mines themselves. But the main concern of the North Vietnamese leaders would be to maintain the flow of essential military and economic goods; they would probably estimate that they could do so, although with far more difficulty and disruption. If the mining were effective against some or all shallow-draft as well as deep-draft shipping, then the greatly increased burden placed on the rail lines would make them highly vulnerable to airstrikes.

11. It is possible that at this point, Hanoi would decide that it simply could not absorb the US moves without a major retaliation. It might try to mine the Tonkin Gulf. And the VC would probably make a sustained effort to close the channel into Saigon.

12. China. To help maintain the flow of supplies, China would probably add to its troops in North Vietnam and perhaps announce their presence. But the Chinese leaders would seek to shift to the USSR the chief responsibility for coping with the

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specific issue of mining. Peiping might also undertake some demonstrative military movements in South China or along the Taiwan Strait, or offer to send ground troops to North Vietnam.

13. The USSR. The mining would be particularly galling to the Soviets, who last year moved some 530,000 tons of goods to North Vietnam by sea. They would be embarrassed by their inability to prevent or counter the US move, but we believe they would be unwilling to take the risks involved in committing their own ships and aircraft to an effort to reopen the ports. They could attempt an airlift, but the quantities of supplies that could be airlifted would be small. Thus, almost all deliveries, military and civilian, would be at the sufferance of Peiping, particularly if the mining made it infeasible to land seaborne cargoes by lighters and small vessels.

14. In these circumstances, the Soviets would be at pains to blame the Chinese for any obstruction of shipments across China. They would probably send a token number of "volunteers" to North Vietnam if Hanoi asked for them, and they might be willing to provide Hanoi with new forms of military assistance, e.g., floating mines and cruise missiles (land-based or on Komor boats) which

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could appear as a direct response to the US mining. By these means, they would seek to limit their loss of influence in Hanoi.

15. The Soviets would be likely to strike back at the US in their bilateral relations, severely reducing what remains of normal contacts on other issues. They would focus their propaganda and diplomatic campaign to get US allies in Europe to repudiate the US action. They might also make other tension promoting gestures. The vigor of the Soviet reaction would be strengthened if the mining operations resulted in some serious damage to Soviet ships. However violently they reacted diplomatically, we think there is some chance that the new situation produced by the mining would lead the Soviets to a more active search for ways to limit the risks of confrontation.

COURSE C: Attacks on the Red River Delta Levees

16. The Communists would estimate that world opinion would be peculiarly sensitive to US attacks on this target, and they would make an intense effort to exploit this sentiment vigorously

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in every sort of forum, claiming that the civilian population was the prime victim of the US action. They would also probably estimate that the US would be unable to inflict and maintain a destruction of the levee system so extensive as to place insupportable burdens on the North Vietnamese economy. Unless and until this estimate was proved to be wrong, the likely effect of attacking the levees would be to stiffen the Communist will to resist.

COURSE D: Unlimited Attacks Against the Transportation System, Airfields, and Certain Other Targets.

17. North Vietnam. A principal object of the preceding actions would have been to increase North Vietnam's need for supplies from outside the country, and to concentrate the flow of these supplies to the land routes from China. Hence the chief importance of the Course D attacks would rest on how successfully they interdicted these routes. In consequence, North Vietnam would have to devote a major effort (including its remaining aircraft, if any) to defending them. However, successful and sustained US attacks on the airfields would almost certainly soon force the remnants of the North Vietnamese air force to seek refuge in South

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China, though it is possible that they would be expended in a desperation attack against US carriers or US bases in South Vietnam. Civilian air operations in Saigon might be subjected to VC attack.

18. China. Apart from providing sanctuary for North Vietnamese aircraft and supplies to Hanoi, China might be asked to allow North Vietnamese aircraft to operate from Chinese bases. We have previously estimated that China, recognizing the risks involved, would prohibit such action. If circumstances were normal in China when the assumed situation arose, we would still make such an estimate. But a variant of this could minimize the direct dangers to China. For example, fighter aircraft might return to North Vietnam if and when the airfields were repaired, and then begin some limited defensive operations. By repeating this process, the Communists could create a semisanctuary in China.

19. China would be greatly concerned over the ability of the North Vietnamese Government to survive. We have previously estimated that if the collapse of North Vietnam seemed certain, China would almost certainly intervene in the war, though this might only mean a substantial occupation of North Vietnam. And this

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still seems likely, assuming that China still has a government capable of taking such an action.

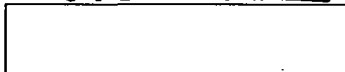
20. The USSR. By this time, the USSR would already have been caught in the crunch of hoping to find some way to end the war without losing Hanoi to the Chinese in the process. With increasing vigor, the USSR would probably urge North Vietnam's leaders to seek peace, but if Hanoi persisted, we believe the Soviets would abide with the North Vietnamese decision.

21. North Korea. North Korea is one area where the Communists could try to relieve the military pressure on Hanoi. North Korea would be concerned that the lack of a vigorous military response in Southeast Asia could affect its own future security. Nevertheless, we think it unlikely that North Korea would be willing to reopen the Korean war either of its own accord or at Moscow's or Peiping's urging.

II. REACTIONS TO AN ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM OF DEESCALATION BY RESTRICTING US BOMBING TO SOUTHERN NORTH VIETNAM AND LAOS

22. North Vietnam. The timing of the US actions and the circumstances in which they took place could be of considerable

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importance. Hanoi and Peiping might attribute the shift to international opinion and to domestic US criticism and see it as confirming their view that the US would not persist in a long struggle. On the other hand, if the moves occurred at a time when Hanoi had hinted at a willingness to talk, Hanoi might interpret the move as a US response and an attempt to move toward negotiations.

23. The USSR. 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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