

ONE Memo

Communist Policy and the Next Phase in Vietnam

12 April 1967

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

12 April 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Policy and the Next Phase in Vietnam

We have been asked to estimate the likely Communist reactions to various US courses of action over the next several months. These are dealt with in Section II. But since these reactions will necessarily be based on the Communists' view of the current situation and the state of the war, we have discussed this topic in Section I.

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Downgrading and
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I. COMMUNIST VIEWS OF THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY SITUATION

1. Hanoi's release on 21 March of private correspondence between President Johnson and Ho Chi Minh apparently marked the end of a period of diplomatic probing that began last fall. This unusual act has been accompanied by other signs that North Vietnam's position is hardening. Communist forces have become more aggressive in recent weeks; there are indications that, after a lull, infiltration may be picking up. Hanoi may also be reinforcing the DMZ area. Some new weapons have been introduced in South Vietnam. In short, recent North Vietnamese actions seem to assume a further period of heightened military effort, and probably also further American escalation.

2. Recently captured documents throw some light on how the North Vietnamese probably view their general position and the course of future development. Almost a year ago, General Vinh, the Deputy Commander of Communist forces in South Vietnam, outlined three phases of future development: (a) fighting, (b) fighting while negotiating, and (c) negotiating and signing of an agreement. It is possible that the first phase lasted through the offensive in the DMZ last summer. Subsequently, heavy infiltration

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slackened and more emphasis was placed on improving guerrilla capabilities. It was during this period that certain hints were dropped about the possibility of negotiations. By the end of Tet, however, it was apparently concluded in Hanoi that no political concessions were in sight, and that another round of fighting was called for.*

3. If this interpretation is correct, then Hanoi probably has not yet seen any need to moderate its main objectives, but does intend to pursue more varied and flexible tactics. The present shift toward heavier combat and reinforcements in the South would be viewed as necessary to condition the enemy to take a more forthcoming approach to negotiations on the next occasion. Hanoi would, as the Vinh document indicated, still reject the extreme Chinese view of fighting "seven years", until China was prepared to join in an "all-out, borderless war." At the same time, it would not yet be prepared to accept what the document alleged to be the

* General Vinh asserted: "Fighting continues until the emergence of a situation where both sides are fighting indecisively... A situation where fighting and negotiations are conducted simultaneously will unmistakably emerge."

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Soviet/East European approach: to negotiate an immediate end to the war and work for power by essentially political tactics after a US withdrawal.

4. The Military Situation. Among the many elements influencing Hanoi's outlook, the military situation in the South is probably still the prime factor. It seems fairly certain that Hanoi concluded some time ago that a purely military solution was impossible. The result, however, seems to have been a growing uncertainty and confusion over proper tactics in the military effort. On the one hand, some North Vietnamese leaders seem to regard guerrilla activities and the war of attrition as the basic line to follow. On the other hand, there appears to be an obsession to win a "decisive" battle that would suddenly alter the entire relationship of political and military forces. Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and in recent weeks there seems to have been a compromise of sorts which emphasizes an across the board military effort.

5. The major current question is whether the North Vietnamese appreciate the realities of the military scene. Does the current intensification of combat mean a last, desperate effort to inflict a major defeat on the US, or is it one more campaign in the

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protracted war of attrition? The evidence suggests that the latter is the more likely. Even so, this is a course of considerable risk. Throughout the past year, the Communist forces have suffered heavy losses, recruitment in South Vietnam has been increasingly difficult, and there have been accumulating signs of deterioration and lowered morale in the VC military-political apparatus. It may be that the top command in Hanoi is to some extent deluded with respect to the progress achieved thus far in the war of attrition; captured documents suggest that Communist field commanders are reporting far greater US and ARVN casualties than they are in fact inflicting. Thus, the Hanoi war planners may over-estimate their prospects.

6. The Attitudes of Peking and Moscow. The events of the last few months, including the upheaval in China, have driven Moscow and Peking even farther apart on all issues and on Vietnam in particular. Even if new arrangements to expedite Soviet supplies through China have been made Hanoi must remain concerned about how the state of Sino-Soviet relations may affect the war effort.

7. The Chinese for their part seem far from reassured that Hanoi can be trusted to fight indefinitely. This suspicion is reflected in Chinese handling of the diplomatic maneuvering of

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the past several months. The Chinese have ignored statements from Hanoi which set forth the latter's terms for beginning discussions with the US. Moreover, at the conclusion of a high level North Vietnamese visit to Peking (11-19 February), the Chinese publicly denounced the idea of starting negotiations with the US if bombing ceased, even though this very formula had just been reconfirmed in the Ho Chi Minh letter.

8. The net result of this exchange has been to introduce another abrasive into Sino-Vietnamese relations. China is intent on persuading Hanoi that a long war of attrition will end with complete victory. And to this end new pledges of assistance and possibly some aid agreements have been made. Yet the Chinese public commitment has been hedged somewhat.* Hostility to any form of united action with the USSR in Vietnam is as strong as ever. And the entire course of the cultural revolution thus far points

* The latest pledge is to "fight shoulder to shoulder with the Vietnamese people and completely wipe out the US aggressors as soon as the situation requires, the Vietnamese people require, and Chairman Mao, our great supreme commander, gives the order."

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to an increasingly Sino-centric outlook and to possible long-term political instability, which also must be a source of continuing concern in Hanoi.

9. The suggestion of a move toward negotiation by Hanoi contained in the Burchett-Trinh interview led, on the occasion of Kosygin's February visit to London, to a flurry of Soviet diplomacy. After many months of flat refusal to engage in mediating activity, Kosygin pressed the British to use their influence in Washington to get a response to Hanoi's move. There is no evidence that Moscow was at the same time pressing Hanoi to offer anything in response to the US demand that cessation of the bombing must have a meaningful quid pro quo. So far as is known, Kosygin stayed within the letter of the brief which the Burchett-Trinh interviews provided: the possibility of talks if the bombing ceased.

10. Hanoi, however, ignored the Kosygin-Wilson byplay; after the Soviet Premier departed, Hanoi viciously denounced Wilson. Subsequent speeches by Kosygin seemed to indicate an effort to fall in line with Hanoi's position. At the same time, the Soviets have been at pains to indicate that despite the publication of the Johnson-Ho letters, Hanoi's position for negotiations has been consistent and does not constitute a total rebuff to the US.

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11. The Soviets probably concluded from the February episode that no mediating initiative by them would be effective at the present stage. All signs continue to indicate that their influence on Hanoi is limited, and that they are unwilling to risk applying real pressure in an attempt to move Hanoi toward negotiations. For the present, new appeals to the Soviets to be helpful in getting talks started would probably bring only stone-walling responses that the bombing must stop first.

12. In a larger context, the Soviets are probably of two minds about the situation in Vietnam. They must see it as extremely advantageous to them in many ways. It diverts most US political and strategic attention away from areas of primary interest to the USSR, and it employs a substantial proportion of US military forces-in-being. Furthermore, the war has alienated many US allies and associates, and it is a divisive factor within the US itself. On the other hand, the conflict holds embarrassing and potentially dangerous aspects for Moscow. The bombing of North Vietnam constitutes a continuing reproach to the Soviet Union, unable as it is to protect its small ally. There is the prospect that the US may undertake new courses of action which would pose more direct and explicit challenges to the USSR.

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There is the chance that it could expand into a larger struggle, involving China directly and placing the USSR in a grave dilemma. In short, there must be many excellent reasons why the Soviet leaders would like to see the war come to an end, and many very good reasons why they would like to see it continue, as long as it does not get much worse.

13. In this situation the broad courses of action open to the Soviets are all unpromising and some are dangerous. If they attempt to force Hanoi into negotiations -- e.g., by threatening to stop supplies -- they may fail, for Hanoi can fight on if it wishes, without Soviet aid. Such a failure would effectively end all Soviet influence in Hanoi, throw North Vietnam entirely back on China, and diminish Soviet prestige in the Communist world as well as in many "uncommitted" countries. The same calamities would follow if Moscow simply withdrew its support of Hanoi in order to escape the risks of deeper involvement. On the other hand, Moscow cannot undertake any serious military participation in the conflict, with its own combat forces, without becoming involved in a most disadvantageous location, far from the sources of Soviet power, and at the end of lines of communication passing through the dubiously friendly territory of China. Finally, if

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Moscow tried to influence the US by heavy pressures elsewhere in the world -- Berlin, for example, or the Middle East -- it would risk provoking a partial US mobilization and a major international crisis. We see no indication that Moscow believes its interests in Vietnam to be great enough to justify such a risky confrontation.

14. Considering everything, then, it seems to us that the Soviets see no feasible alternative but to follow their present policy of continuing the current level of support to Hanoi, while avoiding any great pressure on either North Vietnam or on the US to end the war. The Soviet leaders probably hope that the conflict will indeed come to an end without any further substantial escalation. If they could only be sure that there would be no such escalation they would probably be content to have the struggle continue indefinitely. It remains to consider their probable reactions to the postulated courses of US action, which in themselves represent a further escalation.

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II. REACTIONS TO ESCALATION

COURSE A - ASSUMPTIONS: A substantial increase in the scope and intensity of attacks on military, industrial, and transportation targets. Current restrictions on operations near the Chinese border and on attacks on population centers as such remain in effect. Mining of harbors and bombing the dike system or airfields are excluded. We also assume that the war in South Vietnam becomes more intense.

15. The Economic Consequences. A successful bombing attack against modern industry and an intensive effort to interdict the land transport system would create serious problems for the North Vietnamese. During the short-run adjustment period the disruption of internal distribution systems might be severe. The flow of essential military and economic goods to North Vietnam, however, could almost certainly be sustained, as could the onward movement of supplies to Laos and South Vietnam. Over a longer period, the cumulative effects of the bombing on morale and distribution could increase, but we cannot say at what point they might become significant factors affecting the regime's policies.

16. The major effect of industrial destruction would be to increase annual import requirements from the present level of about 4100 tons per day to about 5500 tons. There are several ways the North Vietnamese could make up the increased requirements:

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by land transport, by sea imports, or by some combination. During 1966 about 1200 tons per day were imported by rail. If the requirements resulting from the destruction of industry were added to the present burden on the rail lines, the new level would be less than 2600 tons per day. This is still well under the capacity of the lines, at present levels of moderate interdiction, which we estimate at 3600 tons per day.

17. If, however, the bombing of the LOCs were successful in greatly reducing the capacity of the rail lines, then the port facilities at Haiphong would have to handle not only the increased requirements generated by the bombing but some of the imports currently brought in by rail. Haiphong is theoretically capable of handling the entire increase resulting from the destruction of industry. This would raise total daily tonnages to about 4200 compared with the current level of over 2800 tons. In this situation, however, Haiphong could only assume about 25 percent of the tonnages currently moved by rail, even by operating the port facilities at their theoretical capacity of 4500 tons a day. Maintaining the port's activity at this level would be a highly difficult and confused operation.

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18. Thus, the port of Haiphong could not assume North Vietnam's entire import burden. The remaining imports, particularly those military supplies normally moved by land transport, could be transported by truck and by rail shuttle service in spite of the increased attacks on highways and railroads.

19. North Vietnam. In these circumstances, we would not expect to see radically different moves from Hanoi. Ho's rejection of reciprocal actions was taken in full recognition of the likelihood that it would be followed by stepped-up US air attacks on North Vietnam. Indeed, Hanoi's strategy of prolonging the war implies acceptance of further substantial US escalation and a willingness to escalate its own effort in the South.

20. Hanoi's aim would be to further reinforce its defenses and its capabilities for keeping essential supplies flowing into the North and to the South. To this end, Hanoi would seek additional military and economic assistance from both China and the USSR. In fact, many of the measures that might offset the effects of intensified bombing have already occurred or are in process. Further Chinese assistance was apparently one of the

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purposes of the high level meeting in Peking in February, and new Chinese contingents of AAA troops were on the way even prior to these talks. An expanded bombing program might require an additional 50,000 - 65,000 men for repair and maintenance and the Chinese might supply some portion of them.

21. The level of Soviet shipping to North Vietnam has risen in recent months. Some airfields in the DRV have been improved. Some new deployments of the SAM system have been noted in the southern part of the DRV. Strengthening of coastal defenses is underway, and this could include the deployment of a coastal defense missile with a range of 25-50 n.m. and a 2,200 pound warhead.

22. To support the war in the South, a record level of supplies apparently is being put through the infiltration corridors. Some medium artillery has apparently been moved down to the DMZ area. There are continuing indications of a further movement of regiments or divisions into this area and into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. A new rocket launcher has appeared in South Vietnam. Recent tactics of the Communist forces suggest that heavier mortars or artillery may be deployed with the main force units.

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23. As a more demonstrative retaliation to the intensified US bombing, Hanoi might consider air or naval attacks on US carriers, an air attack on South Vietnam, an intensification of the Communist military action against government forces in Laos. We think these are unlikely because the anticipated gains would appear to be marginal and the probable US reactions could be very damaging.

24. China. Peking would surely be willing to increase its support of North Vietnam in both men and material, though we have no way of knowing what ceiling if any the Vietnamese might fix on the size of Chinese manpower support. Presumably the Vietnamese would want more AAA and engineer units as the bombing of LOCs is stepped up. If Hanoi and Peking believed that a US invasion had become more likely, they might consider introducing some Chinese combat troops. Some construction activity in North Vietnam and other intelligence suggests contingency planning for a larger Chinese role, but the evidence is not conclusive. In any case, the size and composition of Chinese forces in North Vietnam is likely to be determined by Hanoi's general policy, rather than its specific reaction to a given level of bombing.

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25. The USSR. The Soviets would also increase their aid to Hanoi in response to the increased US bombing. Among other reasons, they would not wish to appear laggard at a time when further Chinese aid was forthcoming. There are a number of weapons the USSR could provide which would materially help the Vietnamese without greatly increasing the direct risks to the USSR. If the Soviets anticipated a US naval blockade, mining, or new troubles in China, they might provide some of these weapons quite promptly and try to build up a stockpile of weapons already in use.

26. Without offering a complete list, we note below certain sorts of weapons or equipment that Moscow might furnish:

A. Air Defense

1. An SA-2 of improved effectiveness, such as is currently used in Soviet forces but not yet provided to North Vietnam.
2. A mobile SAM (the Ganef), with a minimum effective altitude of 1000 feet compared to an estimated 3000 feet for the SA-2s now in North Vietnam. (This system may not yet have been distributed to Soviet forces, however.)

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3. The ZSU-23-4, a self-propelled 23mm AAA gun, with a rate of fire 2-4 times that of guns in North Vietnam.
4. The Yak-28, a fighter aircraft with greater intercept range and low altitude attack capability in all weather conditions than the MIG-21D, the best fighter now in North Vietnamese hands.

B. Ground Weapons

Antitank missiles, antitank artillery, heavier conventional artillery (100 mm and 122 mm howitzer, heavier mortars, some chemical munitions). Some of these could be used in South Vietnam as well.

C. Coastal Defense

1. Coastal defense missiles.
2. KOMAR guided missile patrol boats, carrying an armament of two 20 n.m. surface-to-surface missiles.

Several of these weapons could not be used by Vietnamese without extensive training, but some might be operated by Soviet personnel.

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27. Summary. We would not anticipate great change in the policies and reactions of the Communist powers in response to a Course A bombing program, beyond the furnishing of some new equipment and manpower. Defending North Vietnam and maintaining the war effort in the South would continue to be the principal concerns. As long as these two objectives seemed to be met, resort to more drastic measures or supply of radically different types of equipment would not seem likely. At the same time, this course would probably not bring about negotiations, unless there were some developments in the war in South Vietnam which Hanoi judged made negotiations seem expedient or precipitated a favorable moment for talks.

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COURSE B - ASSUMPTIONS: Course A, plus the mining of North Vietnam ports.

28. This action would threaten Hanoi's ability to support the war and maintain its own internal situation, thus perhaps forcing a new decision about the nature and extent of outside assistance. It would also directly test the extent of Soviet willingness to support Hanoi. Finally, it could put China in a commanding political position, since it would have control over the only remaining supply lines to North Vietnam.

29. The USSR. An effective mining operation would place Moscow in a particularly galling dilemma. The Soviets would not wish to accept the humiliation or the political disadvantages of stopping seaborne shipments to North Vietnam. Yet it would take a major military effort to reopen the shipping routes; they would at a minimum, have to bring in minesweepers, other naval ships for protection, probably some air cover from North Vietnam, and be prepared to risk having some ships sunk. This would be a hazardous venture, since the US could continue to sow mines by air and the Soviets could not prevent it unless they were prepared to begin a major naval and air war in an area where they would be at a great disadvantage. We think they would recognize the problems and dangers and would avoid such a course.

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30. In these circumstances, the Soviets would be thrown back on greatly increased use of Chinese transportation facilities. This would underline the fact that continuing Soviet support of Vietnam was dependent on Peking's pleasure. Some supplies might be airlifted either from the USSR but the amounts delivered would be small.

31. If transportation facilities permitted, the Soviets might send Hanoi weapons and equipment of the sorts suggested under Course A. In addition, the range of weapons could include medium jet bombers, fighter bombers, short-range missiles, and, in an extreme case, MRBMs manned by Soviet crews. Moscow might calculate that these would pose such a threat to South Vietnam that the US would have to consider a cease-fire or a political bargain to halt the war. But the Soviets, in our judgment, would be more likely to consider that the US would not desist merely because of the threat posed by such weapons and that their use would provoke even stronger US attacks.

32. The Soviets have held out the possibility of sending volunteers to North Vietnam, and the mining program might provide the occasion. They might, for example, send personnel to operate

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Soviet furnished equipment, perhaps even some pilots to fly combat missions. But, in general, we believe that the Soviets would still avoid a serious confrontation with the US in South-east Asia.

33. If the Soviets could or would do little in the immediate area, they might consider some action in other places where the US or its allies could be put under pressure. Greatly heightened tensions in Korea is a possibility, though a dangerous one. Turkey and Iran could be candidates, or the Middle East in general.

34. But the most likely place would be Berlin, where US interests are directly engaged and vulnerable, and where the USSR could be surer of controlling the action. The Soviets might put only minor pressure on access routes, to create an impression of impending crisis and to lead European opinion to blame the US rather than Soviet policy for causing the trouble. We think the Soviets would be unlikely to risk any major crisis. It would threaten the gains Moscow is seeking at US expense in Europe by pursuing the line of detente. The Soviets could not be sure of how vigorously the US might respond in Berlin, nor could they have any assurance that the US would choose to make any concessions in Vietnam.

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35. There would be a good chance that the Soviets would at this juncture begin to exert greater efforts to bring about peace. They would have to weigh the risks of some level of confrontation with the US against their reluctance to put real pressure on Hanoi for a political solution. They would almost certainly urge the course of negotiation more vigorously than they have heretofore. But they would probably not be willing to make Hanoi's acceptance of talks an explicit condition of continued material support. If negotiations did get under way, they would, of course, still bend every effort to obtain terms which gave Hanoi some hope of achieving its aims eventually.

36. Of one thing only can we be fairly certain: that the USSR would respond to the mining with across the board hostility toward the US. They would demonstrate this by interrupting any on-going conversations, such as the discussion of AFMs, non-proliferation and a freeze on strategic weapons. In addition they might interfere with various exchanges, and delay ratification or implementation of the consular treaty and air agreement. They might even go so far as to abrogate existing agreements, the test ban and the outer space agreements, though this seems much less likely. Finally, the USSR would probably take the mining issue to the UN where it could expect to receive considerable support.

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37. China. If the mining proved effective against Soviet shipping, China would then be in complete control of military and economic deliveries to North Vietnam. Peking would almost certainly seize the opportunity to reduce Soviet political influence in Hanoi and to discredit the USSR if the Soviets took no military action to open the ports. But there is a limit to how far the Chinese could go in forcing the Russians out of Vietnam. Hanoi would almost certainly insist that priority military items from the USSR be dispatched without interruption. And the Chinese would probably have to do so, if they feared that Hanoi would react by deciding to stop the war. On the other hand, Hanoi would have to recognize that it was greatly dependent on the political and military support of China and could not expect to continue the war or negotiate from a strong position without Peking.

38. It is possible that the mining of the harbors and the anticipated effect on North Vietnam would cause the Chinese to intervene in the war with combat troops and air power. Both Hanoi and Peking could calculate that the US was determined to apply military pressures until North Vietnam capitulated; they might also conclude that this meant an eventual invasion. Under

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such reasoning, the Chinese might decide that intervention at their own choosing was preferable to waiting for a US landing or entering the war in stages.

39. We continue to estimate that China would probably enter the war if North Vietnam were invaded, or if the Hanoi regime appeared about to collapse. But it should be noted: first that the impending collapse of the regime would be an event most difficult to judge in advance, and second, that when and if this moment approached, Hanoi might elect to negotiate with the US rather than be occupied by the Chinese. In any case, we do not believe that the bombing and mining programs would reduce North Vietnam to so critical a state that Peking would unilaterally decide on such a course.

40. North Vietnam. It might be that the weight of US attacks on North Vietnam, especially if coupled with political pressure from Moscow, would bring Hanoi to negotiate. But we believe that the critical element in the decision of North Vietnam's leaders would be their view of Communist prospects in the South. They might, at this stage, still have hopes that US willingness to continue could be sapped by Communist success in a few well-publicized battles, or by a stepped-up campaign of sabotage,

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terrorism, and guerrilla warfare. They might consider that, even at a substantially lower level of logistic support, Communist forces in the South could increase their harassment of US military installations and their attacks on US civilian personnel throughout the country, and could disrupt such pacification efforts as the Revolutionary Development program. Our own judgment is that Hanoi's leaders would be likely to continue the struggle, at the very least until they had weighed the responses, in the US and in the world at large, to the escalation signalled by the mining. And at this stage we do not think that they would seek a major Chinese intervention.

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COURSE C: Bombing North Vietnamese Airfields

41. Attacks on the airfields could confront China with the question of defending North Vietnam with fighters. In fact, the question could be raised earlier, if the North Vietnamese decided to make a heavy commitment of their fighters against the US bombers. Whenever the issue did arise, the Chinese might allow North Vietnamese planes and pilots to operate out of China or might intervene with Chinese planes from Chinese bases. These two responses seem unlikely. They would involve a high risk of hot pursuit or direct retaliation against the Chinese bases. An air war over South China is definitely not to Peking's advantage; it is probable that China would not want to enter such an engagement without using its main power, a ground attack. We doubt that the air defense of Vietnam with fighters is regarded by Peking as so vital as to start a Sino-US war.

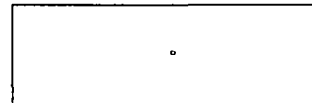
42. We would not rule out some variations in the use of Chinese bases and fighters, depending on the status of North Vietnam's airfields. It might be possible to create a semi-sanctuary by shuttling Vietnamese fighters and pilots back and forth from China to Vietnam as the airfields were repaired. Or

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Chinese fighters and pilots might be deployed into North Vietnam and operate from there. The Chinese might even do this before the fields were attacked in the hope of forestalling such an attack. Peking might view the risks in these kinds of operations as more acceptable.

43. In any case, we can be fairly confident in ruling out any significant Soviet intervention in response to attacks on the airfields. The Soviets would probably be willing to resupply Vietnam with fighters as a gesture of support, and even offer some pilots. But they would probably regard this as essentially futile, once US policy had embraced attacks on all of Vietnam's military airfields.



ky SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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