

SNIE 10-12-65

**Probable Communist Reactions to
a US Course of Action**

2 December 1965

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PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS
TO A U.S. COURSE OF ACTION

Submitted by

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Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf

10 December 1965

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The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and Defense, and the NSA.

Concurring:

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Lieutenant General Joseph F. Carroll, USAF, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency
Dr. Louis W. Tordella, for the Director of the National Security Agency

Abstaining:

Dr. Charles Reichardt, for the Assistant General Manager for Administration, Atomic Energy Commission, and
Mr. William C. Sullivan, Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

10 December 1965

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-12-65: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO A
US COURSE OF ACTION

PROBLEM AND ASSUMPTIONS

This SNIE considers probable Communist and Free World reactions to two kinds of assumed changes in the conflict in Vietnam:

ASSUMPTION I. HEAVIER AIR ATTACKS ON NORTH VIETNAM AND SUBSTANTIAL FURTHER BUILDUP OF US FORCES IN SOUTH VIETNAM

A. The US intensifies aerial attacks on North Vietnam (the DRV), including military targets within the Hanoi-Haiphong "sanctuary," first hitting (1) the main POL facilities and (2) key power plants, then carrying on accelerated ROLLING THUNDER attacks on (3) airfields, (4) LOCs, and other militarily significant targets. The program would extend to (5) aerial mining of the main ports, with sufficient warning to enable shipping to clear the ports prior to activation of the minefields.

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B. The US implements a Phase II buildup of its forces beginning in early 1966 and finishing in September, raising the total US ground forces in South Vietnam from 219,000 to at least 347,000; there would also be some additions to air and naval strength.

ASSUMPTION II. PROSPECTIVE US/GVN VICTORY IN SOUTH VIETNAM

At some point within the next year or so the US/GVN forces in South Vietnam appear to be clearly on the way to destroying the VC/PAVN capability for carrying on the insurgency at significant levels.

DISCUSSION

1. Introduction. In the summer of 1965, the US began its Phase I buildup of forces in South Vietnam, reaching a total of some 166,000 as of 25 November. Sizable units of these forces have engaged the enemy both in coastal areas and in the interior highlands. US air strikes in the North have been extended to include the roads and rail lines from Hanoi, as well as some SAM sites.

2. The Communists have recognized this as an increasing US commitment in Vietnam, perhaps greater than they had initially anticipated. Nevertheless, they have proceeded in a measured fashion, not yielding to US/GVN actions but continuing to press forward with the war along lines previously established. The DRV has made improvements on its LOCs through the Lao panhandle and it has sent additional PAVN units to South Vietnam,

- 2 -

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bringing the total there to some 15,000 men. These forces have engaged in attacks of at least regimental size against US forces. Additional PAVN forces have been recently detected coming down the improved Ho Chi Minh trail and there are indications that more will come.^{1/}

3. The increased US air attacks have elicited an intense response by conventional AAA, and SAM defenses have been increased and utilized, though with limited effectiveness. DRV fighter aircraft reaction has been negligible.

4. Although Chinese Communist fighter aircraft have sometimes scrambled when US flights have come near China, they have not sought combat over the DRV. Chinese railroad troops and other support forces, perhaps as many as 20,000,^{2/} have moved into the northern DRV to maintain and operate supply lines, and these troops may have some AAA units with them. We have detected no major moves of Chinese combat troops in response to developments in Vietnam, but Peking has been constructing airfields near Vietnam on a priority basis and has taken other measures to strengthen its air defense. It has also improved its logistic capabilities near the DRV and Laos.

^{1/} See Annex A for further discussion of PAVN/VC capabilities for further buildup.

^{2/} The Acting Director, National Security Agency, Dr. Louis W. Tordella, and Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, do not believe that there is at this time a reasonable basis for making a numerical estimate of Chinese Communist troop strength in the DRV. They consider that the actual numbers of troops could be substantially more or substantially less than the figure appearing in the text.

I. PROBABLE REACTIONS TO ASSUMED US COURSES OF ACTION

A. To Intensified US Attacks on North Vietnam

5. Intensified US air attacks such as those postulated would probably not, in and of themselves, cause any basic change in DRV policy.^{3/} We believe that Hanoi's leaders would not decide to quit and that PAVN infiltration southward would continue. Though damage from the strikes would make it considerably more difficult to support the war in South Vietnam, these difficulties would not be immediate. Over the longer run, the sustained damage inflicted upon North Vietnam might impose significant limitations on the numbers of PAVN and VC main force units which could be actively supported in South Vietnam from North Vietnam. For this reason, the Communists would explore the possibility of exploiting alternate supply routes from China and the USSR, e.g., by sea to Cambodian ports and thence overland or by inland waterways to South Vietnam.^{4/5/}

^{3/} The views of Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, on the probable effects of such attacks are stated as a footnote to paragraph 13.

^{4/} Lieutenant General Joseph F. Carroll, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; Dr. Louis W. Tordella for the Director, National Security Agency; Rear Admiral Rufus L. Taylor, Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Intelligence), Department of the Navy; Major General Jack E. Thomas, Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, United States Air Force; and Major General Roy Lassetter, Jr., for the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, would modify this judgment to take into account the longer run cumulative effect which intensified air attacks together with the other postulated courses of action included in Assumption I would have on DRV capabilities. They believe that as time goes on and as the impact of sustained bombing in North Vietnam merges with the adverse effects of the other courses of action as they begin to unfold, the DRV would become clearly aware of the extent of US determination and thus might reconsider its position and seek a means to achieve a cessation of the hostilities.

^{5/} Cambodia as a place of transit and entry to South Vietnam is discussed at some length in Annex B.

6. To lessen the weight of the air strikes, the DRV would still have to rely on passive defense measures to reduce the damage, and employment of AAA and SAMs to make the attacks as costly as possible. Even if much of the DRV's air force (at least 64 MIG-15s and 17s and 8 IL-28s) survived the attacks on its bases, it would have but a small and short-lived capability to interfere with the US attacks.

7. It is possible that the DRV has contingency plans for surviving aircraft to attack American bases in the South or US carriers. However, they would probably expect that such strikes would provoke wider and heavier attacks. Hence we think such DRV action unlikely, though the possibility cannot be ruled out.

8. Thus, any significant alleviation from the pressure of the air attacks would have to come from outside the DRV. At a minimum, Hanoi would request, and Peking and Moscow would agree to supply, additional air defense equipment and replacements for essential materiel and equipment destroyed by the air attacks. China would almost certainly send additional logistic troops and, probably, antiaircraft forces, into the DRV. In time, however, sustained damage to the LOCs would make it difficult to supply the materiel for an increased air defense.

9. To defend the DRV, Hanoi might ask permission to operate DRV fighters from Chinese bases, or might request the Soviets and/or the Chinese to provide fighter units of their own, operating from Chinese

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airfields. We believe that the Chinese would not comply with any such request.^{6/} Both the DRV and the Chinese air forces are ill-equipped to engage in sustained combat with US air forces; furthermore, such a contest would invite retaliation against Chinese territory. China would almost certainly not make its air facilities available for operational use by Soviet combat aircraft.

10. We do not believe that either Hanoi or Peking would be willing, at this point, to introduce substantial numbers of Chinese ground combat troops into the DRV. From Hanoi's point of view, such a movement could involve an undesirable expansion of Chinese influence. Moreover, it would seem to both Peking and Hanoi to involve undue risks of a Chinese-US

^{6/} Dr. Louis W. Tordella for the Director, National Security Agency; Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; and Major General Roy Lassetter, Jr., for the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, consider that the chances are about even that the Chinese, if requested by the DRV, would permit DRV aircraft to intervene from Chinese bases, or would even do so with their own aircraft, in the event of continued US air attacks near the Chinese border. They would not expect any of these measures, of themselves, to repel the US attacks militarily, but would hope to make our operations increasingly costly and possibly deter further US escalation while running high but acceptable risks of being bombed themselves.

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military confrontation and a consequent widening of the war which we think the Communists would not wish to invite at this point in the conflict.^{7/}

11. The Soviets would find their policy problems compounded by the US actions. They would seek urgently to ascertain the DRV's attitude toward a political settlement and toward Chinese intervention. The Soviets are committed to help defend the DRV against air attacks, but they would recognize their continued inability to do so effectively. However, they would have little political choice but to try to meet Vietnamese requests for more air defense equipment, though they would continue to avoid overt involvement. Soviet relations with the US would deteriorate further.

12. The expansion of the bombing would be regarded by much of the non-Communist world as a serious new escalation of the war. There would be extensive criticism of the action, particularly if it resulted in heavy civilian casualties. However, there would probably not be any

^{7/} Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the estimate underrates the advantages and overrates the disadvantages which Hanoi and Peking might see in a larger Chinese military presence in North Vietnam. The present situation already indicates that Hanoi will receive whatever numbers of Chinese troops would be useful in repairing and protecting communication lines to China. As US air attacks increase, Hanoi and Peking may feel that a deployment into North Vietnam of a number of ground combat troops would be a salutary warning to the US of Peking's commitment to Hanoi's cause and of the specter of a wider war. While the North Vietnamese would not welcome the increase in influence which this Chinese presence might imply, they would feel this factor more than compensated for by the increasing Chinese contribution to their protection and to the prosecution of the war. They are aware that a very large Chinese presence was eventually withdrawn from North Korea. Neither Hanoi nor Peking would estimate that the mere presence of Chinese forces, nor even their efforts to defend themselves against US attacks, would involve a substantial risk that the US would widen the war. On the contrary, at this juncture such a deployment might well appeal to both regimes as the most effective and safest available deterrent to further US escalation.





significant change in the position of important US allies concerning US policy in Vietnam. Nevertheless, adverse public reactions would create some political problems for the governments in the UK, Italy, and Scandinavia. Some African and Asian nations, perhaps joined by France, would be openly condemnatory and might seek to formalize their protests in the UN. In general, the US would be subjected to increased pressure to cease the bombings and undertake negotiations.

13. Although the nature and extent of Communist and Free World reactions would vary somewhat depending on which targets were bombed, we do not believe that the differences would be critical.^{8/}

^{8/} Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that both Communist and Free World reactions would differ significantly according to the targets attacked. POL facilities could be most plausibly justified as targets relating to infiltration and logistic support of the insurgency in the South. Attacks on power plants, especially those embedded in urban areas, would evoke a stronger reaction from both Communist and Free World governments because it would be widely assumed that we were initiating an effort to destroy the DRV's modest industrial establishment. Attacks on lines of communications and other targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area would confirm the fears generated by the attacks on power plants and would inevitably entail a sharp rise in civilian casualties. The distinction between such operations and all-out war would appear increasingly tenuous. As these attacks expanded, Hanoi would be less and less likely to soften its opposition to negotiations and at some point it would come to feel that it had little left to lose by continuing the fighting. It would be likely to shed whatever political inhibitions it might then still have -- both against a larger PAVN intervention in the South (limited only by logistics) and against a further Chinese garrisoning in the DRV. The latter would become increasingly acceptable not only to deter further US escalation by the specter of Chinese involvement, but also to secure the North from US invasion attempts, to which the bombings might seem to be a prelude. To the extent that the Chinese presence in North Vietnam grew in response to our attacks, even such allies as Japan and the UK would be faced with still heavier domestic pressures to condemn the US openly and to cease all cooperation with our effort in Vietnam. Attacks on DRV airfields would be in a special class. They would be seen by Communists and others to be purely military and would thus not stir the strong reactions that other targets would provoke. Such attacks would, however, probably increase the risk of Chinese involvement as noted in our footnote to paragraph 9.

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14. To Mining the Seaports. During the past five months, calls at North Vietnamese ports by Free World ships, primarily vessels of British and Norwegian registry chartered by the Communists, have ranged between 11 and 21 a month. We believe that mining the main harbors, even with adequate warning to avoid visiting unintentional damage to shipping, would bring increased attacks on US policy throughout the Free World. The Norwegian and British governments, especially, would be under added domestic pressure to oppose the US actions; they probably would register strong protests, but we do not believe that either country would significantly alter its policy toward the US. The Soviet Union would be presented with a particularly unwelcome dilemma. The difficulty of clearing such mine fields and the ease of resowing would virtually rule out efforts to reopen the ports. The Soviets would certainly protest vigorously and might try for some kind of action in the UN. We do not believe, however, that the Soviets would risk their ships in mined Vietnamese harbors. Peking and Hanoi would try to compensate by keeping supplies moving in shallow-draft coastal shipping and overland.

B. To a Phase II Buildup in South Vietnam

15. Both Hanoi and Peking are counting on a loss of US will to continue the struggle in Vietnam, but they have indicated that they do not expect this to happen soon, or before the US has made a substantially greater effort than it has to date. Hence, a further US force increase would, of itself, be unlikely to produce any significant policy change on the part

- 9 -

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of the Communists. The continued buildup would be recognized as a sign that US determination was still strong and that the Communist forces in Vietnam still faced a long struggle. Nevertheless, the Communists almost certainly believe that their motivation and determination are superior, that lack of a clearcut victory combined with domestic and foreign pressures will erode US determination, and that they can outlast the US in this contest, even in the face of extremely heavy troop losses.

16. We believe, therefore, that the principal VC/Hanoi/Peking reaction to the postulated US buildup would be increased infiltration of PAVN units and supplies and continued efforts to generate and exploit anti-American feeling in the South. It would not be the buildup itself, but the results on the field of battle, which would determine any basic change in Communist policy.

17. The GVN leadership would welcome the increased US presence as a sign of increased US commitment. Consciousness of the growing force on their side, however, would almost certainly whet the GVN leaders' appetite for "total victory" and might make them reluctant to cooperate with US efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement. Inevitably, the greatly increased US presence in South Vietnam would generate increased anti-foreign feeling among some segments of the populace.

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II. PROBABLE REACTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT OF A CLEAR TREND TOWARD US/GVN SUCCESS IN THE SOUTH

18. Part I of this estimate discussed reactions to US courses of action under conditions where, though hard pressed, the Communists still felt that time was their ally and that eventual victory would be theirs. Part II addresses a situation in which they have concluded that the tide of battle has turned so unfavorable that their forces in the South face defeat if current policies are continued. The given assumption does not set forth the time or conditions by which this state has been reached, or what sequence of events and decisions may have taken place between now and then. As a working hypothesis, we presuppose that the VC/PAVN forces are taking continued losses at an unacceptable level despite heavy PAVN infiltration, and that the DRV is unwilling or unable to infiltrate and support sufficient additional PAVN to redress the balance.

19. Hanoi could seek to solve its problem either by retrenchment or by escalation. Almost any form of retrenchment would directly involve the VC/NFLSV, and almost any significant escalation would involve increased Chinese participation. Hence, although Hanoi probably would be the primary locus of decision making, it is likely that critical strategic decisions would represent a consensus of the parties involved. The dialogue among them would continue, with each party applying pressures on the others.

- 11 -

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20. Retrenchment. Reducing the level of conflict could be done in a number of ways. These include: a tacit standdown, with PAVN forces and vulnerable cadres returning to the North and the organization in the South going underground; a similar arrangement but accompanied by a high level of VC terror and sabotage, which Hanoi would disclaim; a ceasefire negotiation; negotiations for a "settlement;" or some combination of these. The choice and timing could be orchestrated according to whether the purpose was to seek a temporary respite or to set aside the insurgency for a matter of some years.

21. A retrenchment could offer Hanoi relief from aerial bombing, an end to the manpower and economic drain of supporting the war in the South, and a chance to rebuild the DRV. It could also obviate the need for the presence of Chinese troops in the DRV. It would not mean giving up hope of Communizing the South. The weak popular base of any likely South Vietnamese government, and its questionable prospects for stability following a US military phase out, would offer considerable opportunities for an eventual Communist takeover by one means or another. For China, such a resolution would mean removal of the immediate danger of a war with the US and a chance to concentrate on pressing economic problems at home. The VC would be relieved of heavy casualty rates.

- 12 -

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22. The Communists would also see serious drawbacks in choosing the course of retrenchment. They would be extremely reluctant to admit failure -- to postpone indefinitely their "liberation" of South Vietnam and to concede that all their bitter sacrifices had not paid off. They would fear a collapse of morale among the Communists in the South, with widespread defections. Many of the hard core would have to flee to the North; many of those who remained would be ferreted out and executed, overtly or covertly, by the victorious anti-Communists. The DRV leadership would be faced at home with reduced faith in its rightness.

23. The broader implications of retrenchment would weigh heavily against such a course, particularly with Communist China. During the past year or so, Peking has deliberately and publicly made the Vietnamese war a test-case of Mao's theories that "local wars of liberation" can succeed even in the face of opposition from the US "paper tiger" if only they are pressed with sufficient determination and proper use of the techniques of "peoples war." On this hangs, to a great extent, Peking's present bid for leadership of the Communist and Afro-Asian worlds. The recent intensification of the Sino-Soviet dispute and a series of setbacks for China's foreign policy have undoubtedly added to Peking's desire for a demonstrable victory for its theses in Vietnam. On the other hand, Peking's charges that Moscow has consistently failed to give proper support to the DRV could be a sign that Peking is preparing a possible course of retreat.

- 13 -

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24. Escalation. We find some difficulty in envisioning a practicable and effective way in which the Communists could attempt to reverse the tide in the assumed situation. A Korea-type march of large numbers of Chinese troops into South Vietnam through the DRV and the Laos panhandle would encounter extreme logistic difficulties, would be exposed to interdiction by US/GVN attacks, and would invite US retaliation against China. Yet the number of Chinese forces that could be infiltrated into the South and supported there, given the assumed situation, would be unlikely to achieve what many battalions of PAVN had failed to do, while still involving some risk of US retaliation against China.^{9/}

25. A large number of PAVN troops could be released to go South if Chinese forces moved into the DRV to provide local defense. Such an

^{9/} Major General Roy Lassetter, Jr., for the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, and Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believe that the last sentence does not properly highlight the Chinese Communists threat and the size of the forces that could be moved to and supported in the South. Based upon past performances in both Korea and Tibet, there is no reason to assume that once the Chinese Communists decided to commit ground forces in support of the war in Vietnam, they would not commit the total number of forces they consider within their capability to support in an effort to redress the unfavorable situation. Important factors supporting this position are: our knowledge of the results of air interdiction programs during World War II and the Korean War; the impossibility of doing irreparable damage to LOC capacity; demonstrated Communist logistic resourcefulness in covertly creating forward stockpiles of war materiel; their ability to move large amounts of war materiel long distances over difficult terrain by primitive means; and the difficulty of detecting, let alone stopping the infiltration of personnel over obscure jungle trails.

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additional increment to Communist forces in the South, however, would pose formidable logistic problems. It would also increase DRV concern over a greatly increased Chinese presence in their country.

26. A course somewhat more attractive to both Peking and Hanoi might be to try to disperse US strength and create alarm by developing a front in northern and central Laos and northern Thailand. This might be attempted initially by the use of Pathet Lao forces heavily encadred and supported by Chinese and North Vietnamese. Peking might hope that this tactic, at least in the early stages, would not result in US air attacks on Chinese territory. Other diversionary efforts could be directed at Taiwan, South Korea, or even India, but these would seem to be more useful as threats in being to worry the US than as practical means to alter the course of the war in South Vietnam.

27. None of these courses would carry the assurance of victory, and all of them entail the possibility -- in some cases the near certainty -- of developing into an outright Sino-American war. Peking would realize that this could mean direct attacks on Chinese territory, possibly including the use of nuclear weapons.^{10/}

^{10/} Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, and Dr. Louis W. Tordella for Director, National Security Agency, believe that Peking would feel that it could undertake actions at the lower end of the spectrum indicated in paragraphs 25 and 26 without undue risk of an outright Sino-American war. (See footnote to paragraph 10.) Peking would not, for example, anticipate direct US attacks on Chinese territory -- certainly not nuclear attacks -- in response to an enlarged Chinese ground presence in North Vietnam or to a combined PL/DRV/Chinese offensive in Laos. On the contrary, they would probably calculate that by bringing home to the US the dangerous implications of escalation their actions would probably deter further US moves. This Chinese calculation points to the danger so lucidly discussed in paragraphs 29 and 30 of this estimate -- the danger that the US and China might slide slowly into war, almost without realizing what was happening.



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28. In the light of all these considerations, we believe the odds are better than even^{11/} that, dogmatic and ambitious though the Communists may be, they would, in the circumstances postulated, choose some form of retrenchment rather than further escalation. Looking this far into the future, in light of the many changes that may have taken place in the meantime, we cannot with confidence estimate which of several possible forms this retrenchment would take. We believe that the North Vietnamese, who are bearing a heavy burden, would be the first to incline toward retrenchment. The Chinese, who are not much hurt by the war, would probably be slower to come along, but their ability to stop such a move by Hanoi is limited. The VC/NFLSVN would have to pay the greatest price in a policy of retrenchment and they would probably believe to the last that their cause could be saved if only their allies to the north would do more. However, they would not have the decisive voice.

29. The reasons for the Communists to choose the more prudent course of standing down to fight again another day are persuasive, and we would be inclined to place the chances of their doing so much higher were it not for those factors which, for want of a better word, we call "irrational."

^{11/} Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the odds are only "a little better than even."

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These include not only ideological fanaticism and a world view alien to our thinking but also deep-seated emotional factors including the arrogance of the Chinese leaders and elements of nationalism and racism. Peking's leaders have not always been prudent. Thus we cannot discount their choosing a course of further escalation as heavily as our own reasoning would indicate.^{12/}

30. The discussion in Part II has been based on the implicit assumption that the Communists had allowed the situation to develop against them without a major change in the level of Chinese involvement and that the Communists were forced to make a relatively abrupt, major decision. In fact it is considerably more likely that, as they suffered the successive reverses that brought them from the state of relative optimism described in Part I to the far more somber assessments of Part II, they would have taken steps calculated to reverse or redress the course of events. Hence, we believe that the danger of a Sino-American war lies less in a deliberate

^{12/} Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, does not believe that the choice facing the Chinese leaders is wholly a choice between the rational (retrenchment) and the irrational (escalation), but rather that there is a substantial rational component -- deterring US escalation -- in the latter course. He therefore believes that in the assumed circumstances there is an almost equal chance that the Chinese would enlarge the war and bring in large numbers of Chinese forces.

- 17 -

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and abrupt decision by Peking to take on the US than in a gradual series of relatively minor escalations which almost imperceptibly lead into such a war. For example, as the bombing of the DRV increased, the number of Chinese involved in logistic activities there would increase and their area of operations might gradually extend southward. Antiaircraft and protective ground forces might accompany these logistic troops. Step by step this could lead to a degree of Chinese involvement that would be almost irreversible and might lead to contact at some point between Chinese and American forces.

31. Soviet Reactions. A consideration of Soviet reactions has not been integrated into the preceding discussion because of the limited influence the USSR has on the decisions of the Asian Communists. Faced with a clear trend in favor of the US and GVN, the Soviets would realize that a critical juncture had been reached and that the time had come for plain speaking with Hanoi. At the same time the Soviets would hope to use the situation to enhance their status in Hanoi at Chinese expense. They would almost certainly urge the DRV not to expand the war by accepting large-scale Chinese intervention. They would probably give private warnings to the DRV leaders that Soviet support would not be forthcoming if this advice were disregarded. They might undertake some political initiative, along or in association with other states not directly involved in Vietnam, to try to arrange a ceasefire and in some way afford the DRV an opportunity to save face.

- 18 -

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