

**Memo**

**Possible Effects of Various Programs of  
Air Attack Against the DRV**

**11 February 1966**

APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: JAN 2005

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**CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**  
**OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES**

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11 February 1966

**MEMORANDUM**

**SUBJECT: Possible Effects of Various Programs of Air Attack  
Against the DRV**

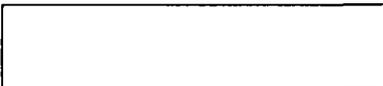
1. In this memorandum we examine the advantages and disadvantages of four different programs against the DRV. We weigh these programs against two US objectives; interdicting the movement of men and material to South Vietnam, and inducing the DRV to take steps to halt the support for the insurgency in SVN. In addition, we have been asked to consider the effects of each program only in the short run, over the next 10 weeks or so. We have, therefore, examined the questions in the light of present US air capabilities in the area.

2. The four assumed programs are;

- (I) a program along the lines of the pre-pause pattern
- (II) a program concentrating on LOCs in the southern DRV

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(III) a similar program, but with the addition of FOL storage facilities

(IV) a much expanded program, exempting only population targets and sources of food supplies.

General Considerations

3. With respect to the first US objective, we do not believe that even the most extensive of the above programs of air attack would prevent the movement of men and supplies to the South in quantities sufficient to sustain or even increase the scale of VC/PAVN activity. Our best judgment is that an average of about 12 tons daily has been required by the VC/PAVN from external sources over the past year. Even if these requirements grow, the total amounts are likely to be well below the capability of the supply lines under the kind of bombing program in effect during 1965. The principal effect of the different bombing levels probably should be measured in terms of slowing down the supply effort, disrupting schedules and operational planning, raising the cost to the DRV, and setting a ceiling on future expansion of the supply rate. Critical to the significance of any ceiling established on DRV capabilities would be the rate of consumption of men and materiel which GVN/allied forces impose on the VC/PAVN forces.

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4. With respect to the second US objective, which bears on the DRV's will to sustain the war, the various US programs might have significantly different effects. These differences are discussed below. But we feel it should be strongly emphasized that all these programs would be less important in the DRV's calculations than the results of combat in South Vietnam.

Course I. The program would be roughly the same as the pre-pause pattern; armed reconnaissance, plus strikes against fixed targets throughout the DRV, but not including the industrial complex, POL or population centers. Presumably, the Hanoi-Haiphong "sanctuary" would remain and there would be a limit on attacks closer than 30 nm from the Chinese border.

5. The record of the last year offers little prospect that this course would accomplish either of the two US objectives. In 1965 the US conducted about 24,000 sorties against targets in the DRV, but infiltration seems nevertheless to have increased, and the DRV reaction to the last pause indicates a continuing determination not to make any concessions to halt bombings. It can be argued that the effects of air attacks are cumulative and that only the phase beginning last October represented a full test of this pattern. But we think it highly doubtful that the pre-pause pattern would move the US much closer to its objectives, and certainly not within ten weeks.

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6. It is likely that the DRV and Chinese expect a much heavier and extensive program from the US. In rejecting recent US diplomatic overtures, the DRV has almost certainly decided that it could absorb an enlarged program which would include targets within the Hanoi-Haiphong "sanctuary". Limiting the bombings in this fashion, therefore, would relieve Hanoi's immediate apprehensions and encourage the DRV to persist along present lines of policy. The chances of this program leading to an escalation of the war are thus quite small. The Soviets too are probably prepared to cope with the political and military problems stemming from at least the pre-pause pattern of bombing. They too are likely to be somewhat relieved and would avoid any radical new steps because of this US course. Thus, the US probably would not be incurring any new risks.

7. This program would have the advantage of damaging both the network supporting the infiltration trails and the supply lines into the DRV. But the US effort would be dispersed over a wide area and no single target complex would feel the maximum weight of a sustained US attack. Moreover, the northern targets and particularly the Haiphong-Hanoi rail line are heavily defended. There would be a risk of chance engagements with Chinese fighters. Because of the location of some of the northern targets, an air

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war with the DRV might develop. Therefore the question might arise of whether to attack DRV air fields and SAM sites near to Hanoi or Haiphong, even if the original program had not included these targets.

8. World opinion would again be disturbed and various pressures for another pause would grow. The US political position might be damaged if UN consideration were still pending.

Course II. This program would concentrate the attacks on LOCs and other military targets in the area of the DRV south of the 20th parallel. It would call for a sustained attack including night bombing. It is further assumed that the existing programs in Laos and against coastal shipping would be continued.

9. In contrast to the previous US bombing effort, this program would focus on a single target complex directly and immediately related to the war in SVN--the LOCs in Military Region IV of the DRV. This area is the narrowest and therefore the most critical juncture of the supply routes coming down into Laos. The DRV now uses about 80,000 men in Military Region IV to maintain the supply effort through Laos. To sustain this force requires tonnages far in excess of the amount ultimately sent into South Vietnam. There is evidence that the total requirements for this southern area are growing, and may be at least 30,000 tons over a 90-day period.

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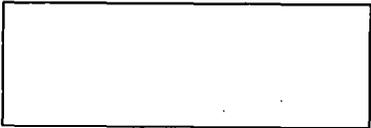
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10. We assume that the forces presently available could provide a capability for almost constant armed reconnaissance against the main north-south and lateral roads as well as supply depots and military installations between the DMZ and Vinh. In practice, however, effectiveness would be limited by such operational factors as weather, darkness, and the characteristics and capabilities of the aircraft. The results would be further degraded by passive and active counter-measures by the North Vietnamese, including the use of secondary roads and trails, camouflage, and the build-up of conventional anti-aircraft artillery along the main routes. On the basis of the DRV's performance to date, we believe that they would be able to continue supplying the essential materials to Military Region IV and that they would even be able to increase the shipment of supplies to South Vietnam if necessary.

11. A concentrated air attack of the type could, however, put a ceiling on future rates of delivery to South Vietnam. This is true of all programs assumed in this memorandum, but we think that, in the short run, the one considered here probably would not only impose a lower ceiling than would the other programs, but would also lay the greater strain on the effort to support the VC/PAVN forces. Of course, this would only hold true if at the

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same time the Communists were prevented from expanding direct shipments to South Vietnam by sea, or by sea to Cambodia and then into South Vietnam.

12. So long as VC/PAVN requirements remained below this ceiling, the main effect of the program would be to slow down and disrupt supplies and increase the general strain upon the DRV. Considering the VC/PAVN penchant for long and detailed planning of offensive operations, the irregularity of deliveries and doubt as to the reliability of resupply might lead to the postponement or cancellation of major offensive operations. These effects would be felt more immediately under this program than under alternatives which were directed against the overall DRV capabilities to support the war.\*

13. This course of action involves the least risk of escalation in terms of possible DRV, Chinese or Soviet responses.

\* This does not mean that the VC/PAVN forces would be disrupted as soon as the program commenced. Our intelligence on stockpiles in Laos and South Vietnam is sketchy, and there is a time lag in confirming the presence of additional PAVN units. Thus, the forces and equipment could already be in a position to launch large scale operations which were planned some time back.

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Air defense in this area is conventional AAA, and it is unlikely that the regime would be willing to reposition its limited SAM system to defend this area, or risk its fighter force this far south. Hanoi could never be sure whether US bombings would again be extended to the northern areas.

14. Another political advantage might be the effect of this more limited program on world opinion. It could be convincingly defended as directly supporting the war effort in South Vietnam. The US probably has gained in world opinion from the pause; the resumption inevitably dissipates some of this credit. As it became clear that the US had not resumed in order to strike at economic and civilian targets, it might be possible to retain much of this political capital. Finally, a limited program would be a lesser commitment of prestige and would be easier to terminate or interrupt should the occasion arise.

15. The major disadvantages of this course would be the grant of immunity to the northern area of the DRV. Imports of all materiel, particularly such critical items as POL, could be stepped up; stockpiles could be created and dispersal of key items could proceed unhindered. Thus the DRV could without much cost increase the rate of supplies funneled southward to Military

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Region IV, and perhaps more than offset any reductions caused by the concentrated US air attacks. At the same time, they could continue the further development of their air force and air defense systems. Unless adequate reconnaissance coverage were maintained, they could conceivably develop undetected some kind of a missile strike capability.

16. To offset these disadvantages this program could be supplemented by occasional attacks upon the northern part of the DRV. If these were restricted to a scale and frequency which detracted only marginally from the weight of attack below the 20th parallel, these irregular attacks would not have the full effects of Course IV, but they would serve certain important ends. They would prevent the DRV from concentrating its anti-aircraft artillery in the southern part of the country. Attacks of this kind on rail lines and roads would require the North Vietnamese to remain in a state of alert and to limit daylight operations.

17. In terms of the second US objective, affecting the DRV's will to persist, this course of action would have little effect. The fact that the US had adopted a limited program might be interpreted as a symptom of weakness, reflecting either fear of Chinese intervention or pressure from domestic and world opinion. Economic life in most of the DRV would be unaffected and the political leaders would have less concern about morale.

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Course III. This would be the same program as the preceding one, but with the addition of attacks on major POL bulk storage facilities throughout North Vietnam.

18. This course would offer the advantages and disadvantages of Course II already mentioned. But by including a simultaneous attack on the entire POL bulk storage system, some immediate disruption would be caused, thereby adding to any effects of bombing in Military Region IV. Compared with other possible economic targets, such as power plants or factories, POL is more directly related to the support of the VC/PAVN in South Vietnam and to the maintenance of the DRV's military establishment.

19. However, we have estimated that the DRV could cushion the impact of POL losses from supplies already concealed or dispersed. This amount may be less than one month's normal supply (15,000 average in 1965). Moreover, it would quickly take steps to overcome its losses. And we estimate that eventually Hanoi could cope with the new difficulties and maintain the necessary POL for operating the supply system for VC/PAVN forces. To offset this would probably call for continued US attacks on LOCs in heavily defended areas. Armed reconnaissance and photo reconnaissance would probably be necessary to locate and destroy new storage facilities. If an effort were then made to seek out

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and attack the dispersed POL storage and distribution facilities in the northern DRV, it would involve a much more intensive program than initially intended.

20. This course would add somewhat to the risks of escalation. Most of the POL is located in sensitive, well protected areas not yet attacked, i.e. near Haiphong and Hanoi. The storage sites at Phuc Yen would almost certainly call for defense by the fighters at the airfield. If raids against POL facilities continued, suppression of SAMs or fighter bases might be necessary.

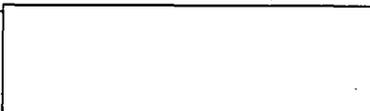
Course IV. This program would attack all categories of targets except population centers and food supplies. It would include power plants, POL storage facilities, and about 30 transportation targets, mainly around Hanoi, Haiphong and the rail lines to China.

21. With respect to the objective of interdiction, we doubt that this program would be any more effective in the short run than the ones outlined in Course II or III. Many of the added targets (e.g. power plants) are only indirectly involved in the logistic support of Communist forces in SVN.

22. With respect to the DRV's resolve, this program would confront the Hanoi regime with much greater problems and dangers

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than the other Courses. It would probably lead the DRV leaders to give greater weight to the chances that, in a subsequent stage, the US would go even farther, e.g. attacks on cities, invasion, use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, if we continue to assume no major change in the military prospects within South Vietnam, in our judgment Hanoi would not respond by offering concessions; almost certainly it would not do so within the first ten weeks or so.

23. This program, however, would involve considerable risk of further escalation. Since almost all important targets would come under attack, the DRV would probably commit its fighters. The North Vietnamese leaders might call on China for air support. The pressures on the USSR to become more directly involved would also grow. World opinion would almost certainly be highly alarmed, and there would almost certainly be heavy pressure on the US from third parties to stop the bombings.

24. Another disadvantage would be that sustained bombing at this level would greatly narrow future US options. If we are correct in believing that, at least in the short run, a positive

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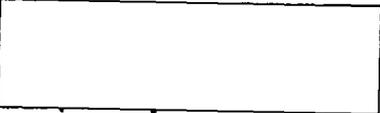
response from Hanoi is highly unlikely, then a further set of decisions would be required. International tensions would be high, as would the pressures for another pause. But if the program were interrupted, the DRV would utilize the pause to repair some of the damage. Thereafter, the US would be confronted with the question of resumption and, since the Course IV program had proved unavailing, of resumption at yet a higher level, such as attacks on population centers. At this extreme level, the risks of Chinese or even Soviet intervention would be much higher, and world reaction would almost certainly be totally hostile.

\* \* \* \* \*

25. On balance, the Course II program of concentrating on the DRV's southern provinces, in conjunction with occasional attacks further north and the program of bombing in Laos, offers the most immediate chance, although not a very great one, of limiting and disrupting support to the VC/PAVN at the lowest risk. It would also retain much of the political credit built up by the pause. It would not visit upon the DRV the kind of destruction which might possibly lead Hanoi to question the wisdom of continuing the conflict. But it would be the easiest from which to advance to higher levels gradually or to interrupt without much cost should

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the occasion arise. A single, heavy attack on POL storage would probably add to the impact of this program in the short term, though there would be a greater chance of adverse world reaction and of escalation.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



SHERMAN KENT  
Chairman

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