

Memo for DCI

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

2 December 1965

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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE
McGEORGE S OF
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

1965 DEC 3 PM 5 18

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JAN 2005

3 December 1965

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Dear Mac:

Herewith an estimative memorandum prepared for me by the Board of National Estimates on the subject of Communist reactions to US attacks on POL installations in North Vietnam. Bob McNamara has found it a thoughtful and useful document, and suggests that you may find it worthwhile too.

Red
W. F. RABORN
Director

Honorable McGeorge Bundy
Special Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

2 December 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Reactions to a US Course of Action in Vietnam

THE PROBLEM: To estimate reactions, principally those of the Communists, to a stepped-up US effort in the Vietnamese war. The measures would include further troop commitments which would double or triple present US strength, bombing of DRV military and industrial targets hitherto spared, and the mining of DRV harbors.

1. Present Communist policy is to continue to prosecute the war vigorously in the South. The Communists recognize that the US reinforcements of 1965 signify a determination to avoid defeat. They expect more US troops and probably anticipate that targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area will come under air attack. Nevertheless, they remain unwilling to damp down the conflict or to move toward negotiation. They expect a long war, but they continue to believe that time is their ally and that their own staying power is superior.

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2. DRV Reactions to Air Strikes. We do not believe that the postulated air attacks, in themselves, would alter these Communist calculations. The DRV would not decide to quit; PAVN infiltration southward would continue. Damage from the strikes would make it considerably more difficult to support the war in the South, but these difficulties would neither be immediate nor insurmountable.

3. Chinese Reactions. China would encourage North Vietnam to persevere and would make strenuous efforts to help overcome the effect of the attacks, e.g., by sending more engineering and support units to North Vietnam. The Chinese would probably provide AAA units but probably not air cover over the DRV from Chinese bases. Almost certainly they would not permit the USSR to operate combat aircraft from Chinese bases.

4. Reactions to Mining. Peiping and Hanoi would try to keep a maximum amount of supplies moving in shallow-draft coastal shipping. The mining would also cause them to make intensive efforts to keep open the rail lines from China.

5. Soviet Reactions. The postulated attacks would probably not only destroy much of the military equipment supplied by the

- 2 -

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USSR but would greatly increase Soviet resupply problems. We believe that Soviet ships would avoid mined areas. Hence, almost of necessity, the volume of Soviet military and economic aid would decline. This would be a major frustration of Moscow's Vietnam policy; it would probably reduce Soviet influence in Hanoi, and it would certainly increase the deterioration in Soviet-US relations.

6. Free World Reactions. Mining would be offensive to most non-Communist nations, particularly to maritime states such as the UK and Norway. The action would be widely criticized, but Free World shipping would avoid mined areas. The combinations of wider air strikes and mining would greatly increase public manifestations of opposition to the US, generate condemnatory efforts in the UN, and make it more difficult to retain foreign government support for the US effort in Vietnam. Widespread apprehension that a wider war was becoming inevitable would markedly increase pressures on the US to negotiate.

7. Reactions to More US Troops. The DRV almost certainly is preparing additional PAVN units for dispatch to the South. We see little chance that, upon learning of US intentions to augment its forces, Hanoi would decide to damp down the war.

- 3 -

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Rather than conclude in advance that the tide of battle would turn permanently against them, the Communists would choose to boost their own commitment and to test US capabilities and will to persevere at a higher level of conflict and casualties. Thus the DRV reaction would probably be a larger program of PAVN infiltration.

8. Longer-Term Reactions. If the US were willing to commit enough forces -- and we cannot say how much would be "enough" -- it could ultimately prevent the DRV/VC from sustaining the conflict at a significant level. When this point was reached, while they could perhaps simply revert to a low level of small-unit actions, they might believe it necessary to make a more fundamental choice between resorting to political tactics or enlarging the war. We believe that it would take a prolonged period of military discouragement to convince the DRV and the VC, persuaded as they are of their inherent advantages, that they had reached such a pass.

9. If this point were reached, Chinese influence would weigh heavily in the DRV's decision. Chinese military intervention would be needed to enlarge the war in an effective way. If this were not forthcoming, the DRV would perforce have to resort

- 4 -

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primarily to political tactics, perhaps continuing harassments and sabotage at a low level. If the Chinese were willing to intervene and enlarge the war, however, the DRV regime would fear the ultimate loss of its independence whatever the final outcome. But China might at this point regard its stakes as so high that it would overbear any reluctance in Hanoi to its intervention. The USSR for its part would argue against this course and probably warn Hanoi to expect no Soviet assistance.

10. Prudence would seem to dictate that Hanoi and Peiping should choose at this stage to reduce the effort in the South, perhaps negotiate, and salvage their resources for another day. We think that the chances are a little better than even that this is what they would do. But their ideological and emotional commitment, and the high political stakes involved, persuade us that there is an almost equal chance that they would do the opposite, that is, enlarge the war and bring in large numbers of Chinese forces. They have made certain preparations which could point in this direction. This latter course would imply that China disbelieved in US willingness to use nuclear weapons, discounted

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their effectiveness, or both. We can by no means rule out such attitudes in Peiping.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

[Redacted Signature]

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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