

Mr. Holdridge
(original to Mr. Hughes
copies to Mr. Howells
Mrs. Avery
Mr. Greene)

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February 10, 1969

MEMORANDUM

TO : Mr. Thomas L. Hughes
FROM : Allen S. Whiting
SUBJECT: INR Estimates and the Vietnam War

File - IN2
Historical
Project

I should like to suggest two additional perspectives to permit a fuller assessment of the basis and validity of INR estimates on the Vietnam War with respect to the likelihood and nature of Chinese Communist support for the Hanoi regime. I have made additional comments in the margins at appropriate points, mostly editorial or stylistic in nature. I would also like to enlarge below on matters raised by an earlier marginal notator (Fred?) as well as on some of the points we discussed in your office.

A. The Problem of Chinese Communist "Intervention"

I have no complaint with the treatment of INR estimates in this area so far as the draft deals with them, but I think it is essential to surmount the problem of separate presentation for more highly classified materials and to re-examine the failure of developments to follow our original prognostication in the light of subsequent research done by others. The first suggestion is to make credible the original estimate; the second is to show where we went astray and how far.

The present text leaves the distinct impression that INR estimates were based primarily on content analysis, placing heavy -- if not exclusive -- weight much of the time on Chinese Communist pronouncements. Some reference is included to actions, including civil defense preparations, airfield construction (although only Ningming is referenced; the duplicate field at Peitun-Yunnan was pointed up at the time as well), and troop deployment into North Vietnam. But the degree of certitude expressed in the estimates looks ridiculous in the absence of other ongoing developments that tracked, slowly but steadily, in the direction of some sort of contingency agreement on joint air defense of North Vietnam.

Without violating the higher level of classification in this memorandum, let me merely mention types of behavior or indicators which may or may not have been present at the time. The files should indicate which ones were detected, in what sequence, and with what implications. Hypothetically speaking, preparations for joint air defense of an area would include an augmentation of airfields for launching and recovery, advantageously located with respect to the comparable time-distance-fuel-flight time ratios of attacker and defender; a meshing of early warning systems; a joint grid pattern to permit quick and common identification; practice overflights of territory normally within one jurisdictional responsibility but likely to be entered by a participating or neighboring defending force; an augmentation of air strength in the nearby area; an augmentation of AAA throughout the

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probable target and adjacent areas; common language ground-to-air controlling systems regardless of pilot nationality; clear friend-from-foe identification; joint master control centers, etc.

My memory pinpoints a few of these as of sufficiently critical importance to give credence to estimates otherwise appearing to depend solely on public pronouncements from Hanoi or Peking. The timing of these indicators, spanning the winters of 1964-5 and 1965-6, is significant with respect to my second suggestion, the source and degree of error in our estimate. But I strongly urge acceptance of this first point in some form or other, lest any reader of this text draw a wholly unjustified inference as to the nature of evidence on which INR based its estimates of likely Chinese Communist air support for North Vietnam.

Insofar as our estimate was predicated on the use of Chinese Communist bases for active defence of North Vietnam, by Chinese as well as North Vietnamese aircraft, it was wrong for the time and targets offered in the prediction. That it was not wholly wrong as an ultimate prediction may be argued on the basis of developments in 1967, a footnote worth including in the text but not worth arguing as a central issue. Instead, I urge widening the text to assess how INR went wrong and possibly suggesting some remedies.

Put most simply, research by Professor Uri Ra'anani and Donald Zagoria (published in China In Crisis, volume 2, edited by Tang Tsou, University of Chicago Press, 1968), points rather convincingly to a serious split within the Peking regime throughout 1965 concerning the types of assistance China should render North Vietnam and assessing the levels of risk therein. The main proponent of a "forward defense," Chief of Staff Lo Jui-ch'ing, apparently lost his position in November 1965. His opponents included, among others, Mao Tse-tung and Lin Piao. One of Lo's prime vulnerabilities seems to have been his proposal for not only a Chinese air defense of North Vietnam but for inclusion of Soviet bloc aircraft as well.

What is particularly interesting about this research is that it was done with the hindsight of Lo's political demise — a fact, incidentally, about which INR was not aware at the time — but without the knowledge of classified information pertaining to Chinese ground or air defense activities, in China or North Vietnam. Thus these analysts support INR's sense of the Chinese strategy circa 1964-65 as articulated by Peking's Chief of Staff, not a poor source by anyone's standards.

This research does claim to discover ongoing dissension throughout the summer of 1965, before Lo's fall and during the time of a steady increase in evidence suggesting the Chinese leadership was acting on a consensual estimate that war with the United States would involve China in the near future. INR did not discern such dissension at the time. For this it could be faulted. It did identify two divergent "scenarios" whereby war could involve

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China. One posited the US as escalating willy-nilly each time it failed to achieve its objectives at extant levels of intervention. This dynamic would inevitably bring the US to China as the "vast rear area" supporting North Vietnam. The second scenario held that the real US objective in Vietnam was attack on China. Both seemed to converge, however, on the need to prepare the Chinese people "for war sooner rather than later, nuclear as well as conventional" (as closely as I recall the key-phrase of the time).

If this scholarly research is correct, at least concerning the growing schism in Peking over the types of assistance and the risks to take, culminating in the fall of Lo Jui-ch'ing, one could restate the significance of "hard indicators" as follows: (1) airfield construction begun in 1964 was originally intended to be used at least by North Vietnamese aircraft as combat sanctuary and almost certainly by Chinese aircraft as well but not by bloc aircraft -- the construction began before Khrushchev fell and before Moscow moved to assist Hanoi significantly in the war; (2) other indicators portending a joint Sino-Vietnamese defense systems continued apace from an original agreement, differences about which emerged only as a behind-the-scenes argument within the Chinese leadership; (3) the original agreement assumed exclusively a US air intervention but the summer of 1965 introduced a massive US ground combat force; (4) whether the disagreement in Peking turned around this miscalculation and/or the question of introducing Soviet bloc aircraft to supplement China's obsolescent air force has not been satisfactorily determined; (5) Lo's fall probably caused Peking to renege on its original contingency pledge to Hanoi; (6) the introduction of PLA ground forces, including AAA, into North Vietnam may have been part of the original commitment, filling in behind NVN units being sent South, but more likely, they emerged in the context of the US ground intervention of mid-1965, perhaps as compensation for the air defense which Peking now refused to carry out; (7) the forward momentum of the original strategy was played out so far as the preparation of airfields was concerned, but their tactical use was never forthcoming in the context anticipated by INR; (8) the consensus on the likelihood of war continued despite the fall of Lo as evidenced by preparations of the populace for war in the fall of 1965, perhaps because of uncertainty over the US response to the PLA presence in NVN and/or anticipation of a significant and sudden escalation of US air attacks (including against IOC's from China) after the long-touted and easily anticipated "pause" of late 1965-66; (9) the change of strategy with the fall of Lo, the failure of the US to change its attack pattern significantly after the January 1966 "pause", and the US announcement without punitive threat of its detecting PLA units in NVN all combined to eliminate any basis for anticipating war in the near future so far as Peking was concerned. Thus by early spring 1966 the "war-scare" had ended, at least in China and, as I recall, in INR/

This reconstruction lowers but does not wholly eliminate the level of risk taken by Peking on Hanoi's behalf, a level which seemed to be perceived as necessitating preparation of the populace for the possibility of US air

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attacks. This set of actions and calculations would seem significant enough in the minds of Hanoi's leadership to argue strongly for the "no-show" behavior throughout the January 1966 cessation of US air attacks against North Vietnam. I would not say this was the sole factor which kept Hanoi fighting at the time but submit it as one of the determining factors. Hanoi had to consider that the "pause" quite likely might end with a total interdiction effort against supply lines from the outside, including China. Worse, it might be followed at some time with an actual invasion. China's guarantees in either contingency would have been essential and, particularly if Hanoi knew of Lo's fall (a likely circumstance), they would have had to be credible. I believe both points were met by the aforementioned circumstances.

B. Retrospect and Remedies

This post-mortem would be incomplete were we to ignore wholly the human resource question. The fact remains that the entire analysis of North Vietnam and Chinese relations thereto rested on the shoulders of one analyst throughout this critical period. Helped (or hindered as it may be) by myself as office director, she nonetheless bore the primary burden for collation of evidence, drafting, defense of estimates at USIB working-level sessions, and the bulk of filing, daily briefing, and other chores connected with her pre-crisis routine assignments. I am not arguing that had we enjoyed more resources we would necessarily have spotted the developments subsequently discovered by scholarly research, although the probability does improve with added personnel either to relieve the senior analyst of drudge-work or to supplement the senior analyst as independent researcher/validators. I do argue, however, that the reader's sense of the situation would be improved were he apprised of the very thin line manning this front at the time.

An alternative means for supplementing human resources, of course, is computer analysis of communications and scanning of other evidence for data retrieval on call. There is no question that this would have been invaluable throughout 1964-68, if only for rerunning and comparing Vietnamese statements on the terms and means for settling the war. But at a higher level of research this might well have caught some of the evidence offered by Ra'annan in particular as suggesting ongoing policy differences and shifts within the Peking leadership. The problem of coding for so restricted a situation as war and near-war would seem to be surmountable. By itself mechanical "analysis" is inadequate. As an aid and check for human analysis, it should no longer be ignored.

As my penned notations indicate, I concur wholeheartedly with the sensible comments offered anonymously as "Sample of Possible Additions to INR Vietnam Project." I find the present text a little sterile as is and

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would urge some thought be given to refining generalizations which might point the way to structural improvements in the estimative process, or at least to pitfalls which only participant-observers are likely to be aware of unless they are flagged to higher-level readers, both present and potential. If there is any single problem so far as INR is concerned it would seem to be the imbalance of human resources available as between itself and its two estimative partners, DOD and CIA. This works multiple injury on INR's ability to (a) vet systematically claims made by others, particularly DOD, in areas peripheral to INR expertise but relevant to INR's concerns, (b) draft and defend in depth over time of crisis with repeated estimates on tight deadlines, in addition to routine responsibilities in State that inevitably expand under such circumstances, (c) allow for the human needs of rest and recreation, recuperation from illness, and re-examination after error, and (d) work on alternative projections to that settled on as the most likely. This latter aspect, "brainstorming the unthinkable," is not a luxury but a necessity if analysts are not to run the danger of digging ever more deeply in their predetermined grooves, perhaps at the risk of estimative "overkill" as occurred with the estimates on Chinese Communist intervention (an error for which I accept full responsibility).

As a structural change, I would urge consideration of shifting the chair for all meetings, working-level and USIB, to a member of the NSC other than any of the three intelligence participants. The chairman's role leads to an interest in consensus and production by deadline that conflicts with the independent position which might otherwise be taken by the CIA representatives. It is perhaps worth noting that the State-CIA estimate done for the Policy Planning Council in the spring of 1964, as I recall, found more unity between the two sides of the Potomac than emerged in subsequent formal SNIE's. Whether or not this proves to be true on the record, the sense of this situation remains a strong memory of the table-talk at various meetings.

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