

ASSESSMENT OF NORTH VIETNAM'S ACTIONS
AND U. S. COUNTER-COURSES

Summary.

We must accept from the outset that Hanoi will be an extremely hard nut to crack, and that the North Vietnamese leaders may well conclude that having held out this far, they can do so sufficiently longer to leave us no choice but to back off. Their prestige is committed to victory, and their entire system may be jeopardized without it. They will thus make a very careful calculus of the odds for and against their being able to achieve their goals. Key factors are (1) their estimate of whether our action represents a last, desperate move which they can resist or the beginning of a serious program that will continue regardless of political consequences, in which they must at least consider the latter; (2) their estimate of their ability to continue to receive sufficient vitally-needed economic assistance from outside sources, principally China and the USSR, to allow the already-strained economy to hold together; and (3) their estimate of whether political conditions in the North can be kept stable. Hanoi faces a real dilemma in weighing these factors against its objectives.

Assuming that the scope of our actions does not suggest to Hanoi that we are attempting to destroy her as a functioning Communist state, we believe that she will respond more in a psychological than a military sense, although a sharp step-up in supporting military activity can be expected. Hanoi will want to generate the maximum amount of pressure possible against the Administration through criticism on the part of the U. S. public and world opinion in general, and to this end will mobilize its political and military resources to suggest that a peaceful solution had been rendered far more difficult, if not impossible, that U. S. combat losses can be expected to rise, and that the war will continue at a higher level. Hanoi probably will break off the Paris talks. It will attempt to use its diplomatic and political resources to mobilize anti-Administration campaigns in politically sensitive countries and within the U. S. itself. It may use new weapons and techniques in Vietnam in order to convey the impression of an escalation of its own. It will step up the pace of operations in South Vietnam, and possibly across the DMZ, and may call for foreign "volunteers". It will rely on South China ports and Chinese rail and road communications to bring supplies into North Vietnam. It will hope that a combination of crisis atmosphere, increased American bloodshed, and an apparent ability on Hanoi's part to keep going will force the Administration to back down and accept a settlement on Hanoi's terms.

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Conceivably, it will call for a stand-down cease-fire in South Vietnam to cause us to stop our operations. Excluding the factor of American public opinion, this situation should be bearable. Hanoi will still want a political settlement, and for this purpose probably will leave the door open for resumption of the Paris talks. Public opinion outside the U. S. has not proven to be a very effective tool, and should remain insignificant in this instance. Heightened military activity brings with it the threat of heavy casualties, which Hanoi has already sought to avoid, and will impose even greater strain on the North than our actions alone would bring. Calling for "volunteers" would tend to internationalize the war, which Hanoi does not want, and would inject new external influences into its policy deliberations, a situation which NVN wishes to avoid. Hanoi has kept the UN out of the situation, and will probably continue to do so. A slackening of Hanoi's military response in a relatively short time can be expected; while the pressures on Hanoi due to our quarantine will continue. If it calls for a cease-fire, this could be taken as a sign of weakness and we should press for more concessions before accepting.

A continuation of our existing policies toward the Vietnam war thus is indicated, along with an intensified public information campaign to put our actions into perspective, and the adoption of whatever military steps are necessary to meet Hanoi's stepped-up military activities so long as these military activities persist.

In effect, our main problem will not be the specifics of what Hanoi does against us but whether or not the North Vietnamese leaders will move toward a compromise within an acceptable time frame. If they do eventually decide to move toward compromise, the signs may be difficult to read in view of Hanoi's need to preserve as much of its prestige as possible. Concrete proposals will not be immediately offered by Hanoi, and should probably be avoided by us in order to leave the Communists a line of retreat. Without it they may well conclude that they have no other option but to fight to the death. We should take every opportunity to make it clear to Hanoi's leaders that we are willing to make it easy for them to change their previous policies.

If and when Hanoi does decide to move toward accepting a genuine compromise settlement of the war, we doubt that it will be deterred by Chinese Communist disapproval of this course.

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Discussion.

A. North Vietnam

We must accept from the outset that Hanoi will be an extremely tough nut to crack. Having held out for almost five years under heavy U. S. pressure and having ordered great sacrifices on the part of the people, the North Vietnamese leaders will be highly reluctant to yield now. In view of the uncompromising stand which they have publicly taken, they will inevitably suffer a loss of prestige before their people and in the eyes of the rest of the Communist world if they start to back down, and the very future of their grasp over the people and the Lao Dong Party may be involved. If they do decide to move toward a compromise, it may be later rather than sooner, after they have had a chance to assess the reaction in North Vietnam and in the U. S. and to calculate the odds for and against their being able to achieve their goals without a breakdown of the economy and the North Vietnamese political system.

Hanoi accordingly can be expected to strive to convey the impression that it is fully capable of withstanding the full weight of our attacks, that it has powerful friends that will be able to help sustain it, that the war will continue indefinitely but at a higher level and with increased American casualties, and that the U. S. action has in fact brought the threat of a wider conflict. All this would be directed principally at American public opinion and secondarily at world opinion, in hopes that the combination of criticism, tension, and increased bloodshed would in a fairly short period of time work upon the Administration to force it to back down and accelerate the U. S. disengagement from Vietnam.

Nevertheless, behind Hanoi's facade of uncompromising bellicosity, the North Vietnamese leaders will be facing real dilemmas which will significantly affect their judgment of North Vietnam's ability to hold out. These include:

Hanoi's Estimate of U. S. Intentions. Although Hanoi's leaders will want to act on the assumption that our attacks represent an act of desperation and that we will be compelled by circumstances to break off fairly soon (an assumption which Peking, at least, will encourage them to make), they will probably be greatly disturbed by the implications inherent in the nature of our attack. Our willingness to reverse entirely the emphasis of the previous year on seeking a political solution to the war and to strike heavily at targets previously left untouched could be read as

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REMARKS

4. Political

Call on Soviet and Chinese for political support in UNGA and in other forums

Organize counter-pressures diplomatically and through information campaign

Surface, together with China, presence of Peking's "volunteers", thus suggesting a new Korean-type war

Recall long-standing history of Chinese presence in NVN

POSSIBLE NORTH VIETNAMESE ACTIONS
AND
US RESPONSES

NVN

US

REMARKS

1. In the South

Step up attacks on urban areas, particularly Saigon, Hue and Danang

Counter with appropriate military operations, publicize violations of 1968 "understandings"

Attacks will probably taper off in fairly brief period due to increased Communist vulnerabilities and run-down in supplies

Attack in strength across the DMZ

Same as above

Same as above

Launch a general "high point" offensive in wide areas of the South

Same as above

Same as above

Launch air attacks into the South against military and civilian targets

Counter with appropriate military operations

Unlikely to be very effective

Presume large-scale infiltration

Step up interdiction efforts

2. In the North
Step up conscription

Manpower shortage may limit this effort, which will also impose further strains on the economy and social structure

NVN

US

REMARKS

Call for Soviet, Chinese, or other "volunteers", to include manned aircraft and engineer, support, and AAA units (mostly from China)

Consider economic and political sanctions against countries sending "volunteers". Continue with operations despite presence of foreign forces or pilots in NVN

May be considered more of symbolic value than of military value, although Chinese units of the type previously in NVN may help to ease manpower strains

Shift DRV aircraft to Chinese airfields in Yunnan and Kwangsi

Chinese will probably not authorize direct attacks on US aircraft from Chinese airfields

Shift LOC's to posts in South China

Continue periodic strikes of road and rail lines in NVN linking NVN with China

Call for Chinese and Soviet cooperation in arranging airlift across China of critical supplies

Continue periodic strikes of NVN airfields

3. Elsewhere
Step up military pressures in Laos

Continue present policies of aiding RLG, implement military and diplomatic contingency plans

Military and diplomatic contingency planning currently under way

Rely more heavily on Cambodian bases for attacks on US and ARVN centers in the South

Threaten Sihanouk with Cambodia becoming a battleground

a U. S. decision to carry on to the end regardless of political consequences. For Hanoi, such a decision could result in the wholesale destruction of the North Vietnamese political system and economic structure -- a situation which Hanoi's leaders have never before faced. They are already quite concerned about the deterioration of political standards in the North, and are attempting to impose a new set of rigid political controls. These could hardly be maintained under stress of sustained U. S. operations at the new levels.

Hanoi's Ability to Continue to Receive Outside Economic Aid.

Even under present conditions Hanoi must rely heavily on outside economic assistance to maintain the living standards of the North Vietnamese people at minimum acceptable standards. One-half of the North's foodgrain requirements are imported via rail from China and by ship from the USSR and Eastern Europe, and consumer goods as well as all other types of vital economic necessities come to a significant extent from outside North Vietnam. Although there has been some degree of economic recovery since the cessation of the US bombing, the economy in general remains fragmented and inefficient. Under the impact of the new level of U. S. attacks, economic conditions could seriously and quickly deteriorate if Hanoi's land and sea communications with the outside world are interdicted and remain so to an appreciable extent. Meanwhile, manpower shortages persist, with a substantial proportion of all able-bodied males long since sent to the armed forces.

Hanoi's Estimate of Internal Political Conditions. Morale in the North since the bombing halt has apparently declined -- the people expected an improvement in their living conditions, but none resulted, and there is an adverse reaction on this score. At the same time, the regime is emphasizing rigid socialist standards, which entails removing some of the vestiges of private enterprise still remaining in the North. Popular resentments are likely to rise as this program is carried out. The manpower shortages have exacerbated the situation, and there is resentment at the continued draft. While overt opposition is not present, passive resistance on the part of some population elements probably does exist. The regime is capable of maintaining control now, but over a period of time under changed circumstances may find the problem much greater.

Bearing in mind the foregoing considerations, Hanoi will probably take the following specific actions:

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1. Hanoi will almost certainly break off the Paris talks. It may do so by completely removing its delegation and that of the NLF/PRG, or it might decide to leave some low-level representatives behind as a means of maintaining some contact -- after all, Hanoi does want to end the war, and realizes that it will have to talk to us to do so.

2. Hanoi will appeal to world opinion in general to condemn us, and may open a diplomatic and propaganda campaign through friendly countries and in the U. S. itself to isolate us and cause us to give up our military pressure and simply get out of Vietnam.

3. Hanoi may attempt to induce the USSR and the Eastern European countries to make a special diplomatic effort to make us back away, including introducing resolutions to condemn us in the UN Security Council, and possibly also threats of direct intervention.

4. In its diplomatic stance toward us, Hanoi will probably want to appear to be hard and uncompromising, in order not to suggest weakness or to convey the impression that our attacks had struck home hard enough to cause it to offer concessions. However, Hanoi may well utilize its assets in South Vietnam to attempt to draw the fangs of our operations and make us back off. One possibility open to it is to initiate a call for a stand-still cease-fire via the "Provisional Revolutionary Government" which would leave all forces in place. The PRG could also call for some form of territorial accommodation in which it would call for de facto control over large areas of South Vietnam on the basis of the "revolutionary councils" which the Communists claim to have set-up in many places on the basis of "free elections". Hanoi could anticipate a wide measure of popular support in the U.S. for a cease-fire call, with very little critical attention paid to the circumstances under which it was to be effected. The net effect could be a sufficient buildup of political pressure on us to halt all military activities under conditions which Hanoi would hope to exploit better than we could. A cease-fire call could also cause friction between ourselves and the GVN, in view of the latter's opposition to any form of cease-fire.

5. Militarily:

a. In the South, under the assumption that the "understandings" of 1968 were rendered invalid by our operation, we can anticipate more blatant attacks on urban areas, particularly Saigon, Hue, and Danang. In

addition, there may well be more pressure across the DMZ. Throughout SVN, once the word had been passed and preparations made, there will probably be another "high point" of some consequence intended to inflict as many U. S. casualties as possible to support the activities of anti-war elements in the U. S. It is conceivable that Hanoi may attempt to launch air operations across the DMZ into the South to show that if we escalate, it can too. Finally, Hanoi may resume large-scale infiltration.

b. In the North. In the DRV itself there will almost surely be an effort to step up the draft and mobilize the masses for a much longer war, but Hanoi's latitude in this respect might be curtailed due to manpower limitations and the war-weariness of the people of North Vietnam. (In fact, a return to the status quo ante November 1, 1968, might have a serious negative effect on the people, who have been anxious to see the war end completely, not continue indefinitely.) One new course which is open to Hanoi is to call for "volunteers", as it has occasionally threatened to do, possibly up to and including Soviet pilots and/or aircraft, or manpower drafts along the lines of the Chinese troop contribution. Hanoi will call on Communist China to furnish deep-water ports in South China to replace the quarantined ports, and to permit the continued use of Chinese airfields to Yunnan and Kwangsi as havens for DRV combat aircraft. It may appeal to Moscow and Peking to cooperate to the extent of permitting a Soviet airlift across China and to facilitate the shipment of supplies by rail across China.

c. Elsewhere. Hanoi may counter by stepping up the war in Laos in an attempt to bring about the rapid erosion or collapse of the Souvanna Government, hence diverting our military resources from North Vietnam to meet the wider threat. The North Vietnamese appear to be introducing a new, full division into Northern Laos, which when added to the estimated 13-20,000 DRV forces already there may be capable of retaking the Plaine des Jarres, Muong Soi, and going on to threaten seriously Luang Prabang and Vientiane. The Souvanna Government may not be able to continue if such an attack materializes. Hanoi could anticipate a fair share of public outcry in the U. S. on the score of U. S. overextension if we should respond to meet such a new set of circumstances in Laos, while a collapse of the Souvanna Government and its replacement by a Communist regime would cause great alarm in Thailand and complicate our relations with the Thai.

In Cambodia, it is conceivable that Hanoi may attempt to drive Sihanouk entirely over to the DRV side, and gain fuller access to Cambodian territory for sanctuary and for staging operations than is now the case.

B. U.S. Counter-Reaction

All these moves by Hanoi should be bearable, leaving out the factor of U.S. public opinion.

In Paris, we will simply sit tight, and tell the world that we are willing to resume the talks anytime Hanoi wants to join us. If there are DRV representatives remaining in Paris, we should attempt to see them. We should not, however, attempt to maintain contact with the PRG/NLF representatives unless the GVN is also present.

With respect to Hanoi's appeals for help, we can assume that neither the USSR nor the Eastern European countries want direct involvement. Mere expressions of political and economic support will cause no real pain. The very nature of our actions should make the provision of economic assistance more difficult. In the UN, we will attempt to avoid a vote by mobilizing sufficient votes in the Security Council to kill a condemnation, and attempting similarly to head off a "uniting for peace" effort. We will continue our own publicity campaign to justify our actions, and hope that the brief period of our operations will ease the pressures on us. Actually, the more active the USSR and the Eastern European countries are, the better, since we want them involved and can assume that all, including USSR, will want the war to end before they themselves become drawn in any deeper.

A PRG call for a cease-fire could be troublesome to deal with if simply put in terms of a stand-down cease-fire throughout the South without reference to other, accompanying considerations such as mutual troop withdrawals. U.S. opinion may see such a cease-fire as a way out, and demand acceptance. Our response should be to agree in principle to such a cease-fire provided the proper details were worked out in advance to permit it to be effectively-maintained, and provided the principle of mutual withdrawals of all foreign troops from South Vietnam were accepted and such withdrawals actually implemented during a cease-fire. We could insist that the details had to be worked out between the PRG and the GVN, thus creating a reason for the two sides to get together for direct talks which

the Communists might find difficult to resist. It should be noted that a cease-fire appeal would cause problems for the Communists as well, since the degree of territorial control which they would be able to claim on physical terms is far less than they would desire. In addition, their forces are already plagued by a lack of willingness to fight on the basis of "the war is nearly over and why take risks" philosophy, and a rapid deterioration of Communist military assets could occur following a cease-fire appeal. Indeed, the fact that the cease-fire issue has not yet been raised by the Communists suggests that they do not presently see it as favoring their interests. In these terms, a call by Hanoi or the PRG for a cease-fire could be taken as a sign of weakness. Accordingly, we should not give in to public opinion, but should insist on achieving at the minimum a response on mutual withdrawal and supervision before acceding to a cease-fire.

None of Hanoi's military actions in the South should cause us any insuperable difficulty, given the state of the enemy capabilities. Attacks across the DMZ would probably be roughly about the current scale unless Hanoi wanted to change its operations entirely and invite a major conflict; however, larger-scale operations bring greater vulnerabilities and invite higher casualties. Air attacks could be warded off, and the state of training of the DRV air force may not in any event be such as to make such attacks effective. The main problem would be the resumption of larger-scale infiltration, but this, as noted, would mean a complete reassessment of strategy, tactics, and goals -- a difficult process in Hanoi without Ho Chi Minh. In addition, heavy infiltration would dip deeply into North Vietnam's manpower pool, which could be troublesome in Hanoi, and require a considerable increase in logistical support, which may not be feasible. Our most important military response would thus be to delay scheduled troop withdrawals, to take advantage of any increased enemy vulnerabilities, and to suggest that we would be willing to fight it out on any scale.

Regarding Hanoi's moves in the North, we should remain calm and anticipate that much of what Hanoi may say it will do is window-dressing intended more for a war of nerves than for real military effect. If draft calls go up there will be political and economic strains on Hanoi. Calling for "volunteers" would have the disadvantages from Hanoi's standpoint of tending to internationalize the war and take it out from under direct Hanoi control -- the larger the outside contribution, the more say the contributors would possess. This is supposing that the most likely



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contributors, the USSR, the Eastern European countries, and Communist China, would want to be directly involved in the first place. An "international brigade" would be more of a show than a militarily-useful contribution. We might suggest, however, that countries from which "volunteers" were sent would be liable to political and economic counter-measures, if not military reprisals. Chinese manpower, if returned, will help, however, in easing Hanoi's own manpower strains.

The shift of Hanoi's seaborne traffic to South China ports will ease the pressures on it over time, but will require some months to be effective and still leave vulnerabilities, particularly in connection with follow-up attacks on road and rail connections to China inside North Vietnam.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, our follow-on military planning will need to take the new contingencies into consideration. We should begin now to strengthen the Lao armed forces, and in fact are doing so. Extra increments of aid may be necessary, and U.S. military operations on the ground in Laos should be at least contemplated. There is a chance that Hanoi may overextend itself if it tries to accomplish too much in Laos. Regarding Cambodia, we should warn Sihanouk of the possible consequences to his neutrality which direct involvement would entail, and suggest the possibility of Cambodia becoming a battleground if Hanoi's actions there should require a U.S. military response.

The main problem for us will not be the specifics of what Hanoi does but will simply be whether or not Hanoi's leaders will move toward a compromise within an acceptable time-frame. Their various actions to respond to our operation will not count so much as their determination to last us out. It may well conclude that they can get away with calling on their people to tighten their belts and to make do with what they have for as long as they possibly can.

If, as already noted, Hanoi's leaders decide that the undesirable features of resisting a compromise outweigh the undesirable features of holding firm, some signs may be set to us. These could include a beginning of North Vietnamese troop withdrawals from the South, a willingness on the part of the PRG to deal directly with the GVN, and a slackening of the level of hostilities in the South. When we pick them up, we should avoid to the extent feasible a public declamation on the subject, because of Hanoi's need to maintain its prestige. In keeping with Asian military

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tradition, a line of retreat should be left for a defeated enemy on the principle that if he considers himself cornered he is likely to fight to the death in the belief that he has no other recourse. We will thus need to set with great discretion and judgment in handling Hanoi, and should take every opportunity to make it clear through intermediaries that we would be willing to make it as easy as we can for the North Vietnamese to change their previous policies.

If Hanoi should decide to move toward a compromise solution, we doubt that it will allow itself to be deterred by opposition on Communist China's part. Peking has publicly made its objections to a negotiated settlement known on numerous occasions, yet Hanoi has moved ahead; presumably Hanoi would do so again even under circumstances in which the outcome of the negotiations would appear far less satisfactory from Peking's standpoint than, say, under the present circumstances. As noted above, for Hanoi to follow the alternative course of calling for direct Soviet and/or Chinese intervention raises the problem of loss of control over its power of decision, and as far as Communist China is concerned, possible domination of North Vietnam by a traditional enemy of Vietnamese nationalism. Moreover, Hanoi is probably well aware of the Chinese position against engaging in a direct confrontation with the U.S. (see below under Assessment of Chinese Communist Courses of Action).

A list of the political desiderata which we want to achieve from Hanoi through our military operations follows.

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POLITICAL OBJECTIVES TO BE GAINED FROM
MILITARY OPERATIONS

Basically, what we want to achieve politically is a clear and unmistakable intention on Hanoi's part to accept the principle that the people of South Vietnam should be free to determine their future for themselves without outside interference. This should be signified by the North Vietnamese in tangible ways, as follows:

- By indicating to us directly in Paris (reopening the talks for this purpose if they had earlier broken them off) that they have accepted our principle, and by following up their acceptance with genuine negotiating proposals asking for specifics on our proposals and outlining in a spirit of compromise what changes, if any, they would want in order to protect their interests. They could also indicate a willingness to examine both the President's 8-point proposal and their 10-point proposal to establish areas of agreement.
- By abandoning their stand against dealing with the Thieu Government and opening direct talks between the GVN and the NLF (or PRG) to work out the details of election organization and supervision.
- By demonstrating acceptance of our call for mutual troop withdrawals. This need not be done formally, but could be accomplished by undertaking substantial troop movements which would unmistakably constitute withdrawals of their forces.
- By effecting a "lull" in hostilities in the South, and letting us know directly or through intermediaries that it was definitely intended as a signal of their intention to lower the level of hostilities markedly and permanently.
- By ending their infiltration of men into South Vietnam.
- By removing their forces from Laos and Cambodia.

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Attainment of the first two of the foregoing objectives will probably not be achieved immediately in view of the loss of prestige which the North Vietnamese leaders would suffer if they appeared to be capitulating quickly to our pressure. They may, however, attempt to signify movement in this direction by undertaking some or all of the next steps. In such an event, we should expect firm assurances through intermediaries that these steps were, in fact, intended to show Hanoi's acceptance of our basic principle and that negotiations, including direct talks between the GVN and the NLF/PRG, would shortly resume. We should not accept one of the moves alone, e.g. effecting a "lull", as constituting sufficient proof of Hanoi's good intentions.

Additionally, Hanoi may attempt to appear responsive by:

- Expressing a willingness to restore and abide by the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos.
- Calling for a cease-fire.

These moves must also be accompanied by more tangible steps to be acceptable. Restoration of the Geneva Agreements and the Geneva Accords cannot be accomplished without the removal of foreign troops from Cambodia and Laos, and a call for a cease-fire cannot be agreed to without at the minimum Hanoi's responding affirmatively and demonstrably to our call for mutual troop withdrawals. We will also want agreement on international supervision of a cease-fire at an early stage.

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