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SUBJECT Estimate of (a) DRV Courses of Action re SVN and (b) DRV Reaction to Escalation of US Military Measures in SVN

COPY NO. 13
SERIES BINTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

This estimate predicts likely future DRV military and political actions with respect to South Viet-Nam, points up internal DRV and international Communist factors which may well limit the DRV's freedom of action, and outlines probable DRV reaction to various possible degrees of escalation of US military measures in Viet-Nam.

It is the conclusion of this estimate that the DRV will gradually, though not necessarily steadily, intensify the development of military activities in SVN toward more regular warfare, but will avoid the openly admitted use of DRV forces primarily in an effort to obfuscate international opinion and contain the scale of US intervention. The DRV may also adopt the political maneuver of establishment of a "liberation government" somewhere in South Viet-Nam. Resort to this maneuver or at least its timing may well depend upon the DRV and perhaps the Communist bloc's assessment of likely US reaction, international attitude toward the war in Viet-Nam and the GVN's political standing both internally and internationally.

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Escalation of US military moves in South Viet-Nam to counter intensification of the DRV's campaign for take-over of SVN would likely be met by further escalation by the DRV. The DRV's freedom of action is, however, probably limited by its desire to avoid the internal consequences of a Soviet-Chicom disagreement over the risks of global war in Southeast Asia, as well as its traditional fear and distrust of China. In view of these and other factors, a threat by the US to hit selected targets in North Viet-Nam by air and naval means would stand a good chance of achieving the US objective of compelling the DRV to cease or dampen down its aggression against SVN. The DRV reaction might be influenced in considerable measure by the world view at the time about the onus of responsibility for the war in Viet-Nam as well as the CVN's internal and external political standing. It seems doubtful that a threat of this sort would lead to a DRV appeal for Chicom intervention, but a threat to introduce US ground forces into North Viet-Nam would seriously increase the risk of that possibility.

Likely DRV Courses of Action re SVN

1. There seems every reason to believe that the DRV will seek to develop its military activities in SVN along the lines laid out in General Vo Nguyen Giap's book "People's War, People's Army",* i.e., through the stages of guerrilla warfare, mobile warfare, and general offensive by a regular army. These tactics served the Viet Minh brilliantly during the Indochina War against the French, with Giap as the artisan of that victory. They have thus far also been applied with disturbing success by the Viet Cong against the Republic of Viet-Nam.

2. Having found or created the appropriate political climate in South Viet-Nam, the DRV began the serious application of Giap's military tactics in late 1959 with the initiation of "guerrilla warfare" on an extensive scale. In the two years since then, the Viet Cong armed forces have grown from about 1500-2000 (estimated in October, 1959) to their present level of about 20,000, and units of increasingly larger size up to battalions have been formed. Effective Viet Cong control has been steadily

* New edition in English published in Hanoi in the fall of 1961.

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expanded over the countryside (as during the Indochina War), GVN administration has disintegrated in many rural areas, and the economy (particularly rice, the mainstay crop, and potentially rubber, the biggest export earner) is now seriously affected.

3. It seems clear that the DRV military effort is capable, at least in certain areas of SVN, of attaining Giap's second stage of "mobile warfare," the stage at which "principles of regular warfare gradually appear and develop." This was most apparent in the three large-scale Viet Cong actions in September, 1961, north of Kontum, south of Fannethuot, and in the temporary capture of the capital of Phuoc Thanh Province, each of which involved a Viet Cong force estimated at 1,000 or more.

4. This does not mean that VC operations have reached the second stage everywhere in South Viet-Nam, nor that the progression in the VC use of Giap's tactics will be steadily in a straight line. As Giap states, there is still a "guerrilla character" in the second stage, which appears quite evident from the nature of the war in South Viet-Nam since September during which the accent has reverted to the mounting of hundreds of smaller-scale incidents. Giap has also laid particular stress on patience and the unimportance of time, and this may help to explain why the Viet Cong despite their capability have not pulled off since September any attacks on the scale of the three major ones of that period. Since early October there has been constant discussion of the escalation of US military effort in SVN, and the DRV may have reasoned that decisions on the degree of this escalation and thus of the DRV's opposition in SVN could be influenced if no further larger-scale attacks were carried out for the moment.

5. It can be expected that over the coming months the Viet Cong will continue to build up their armed strength through local recruitment and infiltration and through capture and introduction of arms. While likely to stress organization and training in the further development of larger armed units, they will probably continue to carry out smaller incidents in heavy volume, and are also likely to mount larger scale attacks from time to time involving 1,000 or more VC. The latter will probably be done as much for the political reason of destroying morale as for the military factor of destroying GVN forces. Probable encouragement to militancy by the Chicom military mission which has recently visited North Viet-Nam may tend to increase the number of larger attacks. Their timing may, however, be influenced by the extent of US diplomatic and military preoccupation elsewhere.

6. Politically the DRV will undoubtedly continue application of the "united front" tactics reasserted at the Lao Dong Party congress in September 1960, and initiated with the establishment in December 1960

of the "Front for the Liberation of South Viet-Nam." These tactics for political struggle are also approved by Giap in his book, and are obviously aimed at obtaining maximum political support among the people for the military take-over outlined by Giap and may help to accelerate the time-table for that take-over.

7. Future application of the "united front" tactics include the possibility of either or both of the following:*

a. Exploitation of the possibilities which would be offered by the attempted overthrow of the Diem Government by non-Communists.** The Viet Cong do not have sufficient military strength at this time to seize and hold power directly during a coup d'état attempt. However, they might well seek through "united front" tactics to ally themselves with a possible successor government, and would probably feel that a stand-off between the Diem Government and the coup promoters would increase the chances for such a maneuver. It is difficult to believe, however, that such a maneuver would hold much hope for success if (as seems likely) the coup group were comprised of strongly anti-Communist personalities seeking to improve the efficiency of the fight against the Viet Cong. The most likely way in which the VC could seek to profit from a coup attempt would be by seizure of a provincial area or areas during the struggle between the pro-Diem and anti-Diem wings of the non-Communist forces. This might then serve as the basis for the VC creation of a "liberation government".

b. Establishment of a "liberation government" somewhere in South Viet-Nam (either in connection with a coup attempt against Diem as described above or under other circumstances). Recent history in Laos with the Soviet airlift to the Souvanna Phouma Government, and in the Congo where several neutralist and Communist countries recognized the fictional Gizenga Government, probably encourages the DRV to consider seriously such a political maneuver. If the "liberation government" could hold on to a piece of territory long enough for a Communist bloc airlift to start operating, this would greatly facilitate the military activities of the Viet Cong, and possibly the Communist bloc airlift might even continue (as it has in Laos) without extensive international condemnation. On the other hand, the GVN's fighter capacity may serve as a deterrent to

* See Saigon's Telegram 858, Dec. 27, 1961, re announcement by Provisional Central Committee of National Front for Liberation of South Viet-Nam on question of establishment of "independent and democratic administration" in SVN.

** See FVS-6534 re captured Communist document on what VC hope to do to exploit a coup attempt.

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establishment of an airlift, and a "liberation government" might be supplied and supported via the ground from Communist-controlled territory in adjacent Laos.

DRV resort to, and exploitation of the "liberation government" maneuver may well depend to a considerable degree on the state of international opinion about (a) the responsibility for the war in Viet-Nam and (b) the extent of the GVN's support among the people. At the very least these factors could affect the timing of any DRV decision on establishment of a "liberation government."

Concern over US reaction may be an inhibiting factor toward the DRV's moving ahead with such a maneuver, or at the least to an airlift exploitation of this development. The DRV might be deterred by the feeling that such moves would provoke direct US military intervention in Viet-Nam which in turn would raise a host of other problems for the DRV (as outlined in the next section).

Probable Limitations on DRV's Freedom of Action

1. The DRV's military campaign to date has been hampered by the self-imposed restriction of clandestinity on the DRV's role in guiding and supporting the Viet Cong. The purpose of this restriction has been to prevent a condemnation by the ICC and an adverse reaction by international opinion, and, above all, to avoid provoking an increasing external military intervention in Viet-Nam which would be supported by world opinion.

2. It is believed that these factors will continue to influence the nature of the war in Viet-Nam and particularly the methods of DRV support of the Viet Cong forces in South Viet-Nam. While that support is likely to become less and less covert, it is doubtful that it will reach the point of being openly and officially admitted, even if a "liberation government" is established. The precedent in Laos (where no open admission of DRV involvement has ever occurred) would probably be followed in an effort to contain the reaction of international opinion. The DRV will face a difficult political decision if it becomes militarily necessary for it to decide whether to introduce North Vietnamese personnel and/or Communist bloc arms into South Viet-Nam. To date infiltration has consisted of regrouped southerners as the introduction of northerners would more clearly show the DRV hand. For the same reason there has been no real evidence to date of VC use of arms of Communist bloc origin.

3. Less clear, but probably also a limiting factor of increasing importance in the DRV's freedom of action in pursuing its goal of taking over Viet-Nam, is the relationship of the Soviet-Chicom conflict to this question. Up to the present, and probably as long as the DRV's military

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activities in South Viet-Nam do not seriously entail embroilment of the USSR and Communist China in an explosive disagreement over the risks of global war; it seems likely that the DRV can determine with considerable independence/for the two giants in the bloc the tactics which it will follow in pursuit of its goal in Viet-Nam. The DRV is, after all, seeking expansion of the territory controlled by Communism, a goal to which both the USSR and Communist China subscribe, and both are probably willing to commit military supplies for this purpose without necessarily prescribing how the DRV should conduct itself. The DRV leaders were, moreover, accustomed during the Indochina War to considerable freedom in the choice of their tactics, and there appears to be no good reason why this should not continue as long as areas of sensitivity between the USSR and Communist China can be avoided.

4. However, as the scope of the DRV's military activities grow (which they must in application of Giap's tactics), the risk of increasing external intervention (especially by the US) and, therefore, of global war rises, with important consequences for the Communist bloc internationally and for the DRV internally. There is good reason to believe that the DRV leadership must be particularly sensitive to the probable Soviet and Chicom reaction to its further moves. Generation of serious Soviet-Chicom debate and disagreement over DRV military intentions or moves might well give rise to corresponding dissension between the pro-Soviet and pro-Chicom wings of the Lao Dong Party, and would tend to undermine Ho Chi Minh's carefully calculated neutral line and his role as peacemaker between the two giants.

5. Similarly, the age-old Vietnamese fear and distrust of China probably operates as a limiting factor. It seems plausible to believe that the DRV leadership will seek to handle the escalation of its military effort in a sufficiently cautious manner to avoid provoking a US reaction of a type which would in turn either (a) force the DRV leaders for the preservation of their own regime to appeal for Chicom entry, or (b) cause the Chicoms to undertake direct intervention for their own security without awaiting a DRV appeal. The DRV did not request Chicom intervention in the Indochina War except for supplies, advisors and technicians. The same protagonists in the debate over the Chicoms' role at that time -- Giap (pro-Soviet and anti-Chinese) and Truong Chinh (leader of the pro-Chinese faction) -- are still on the scene, and Giap's influence seems to have been growing and Truong Chinh's declining during the past year.

6. A further limiting factor could be the probable aversion of the DRV leadership to war destruction or serious damage to the economic structure it is building up in North Vietnam.

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Possible Escalation of US Military Measures
and Likely DRV Reaction

1. Assumptions:

a. That the situation in SVN, even though there may be some increase in GVN effectiveness, will continue to deteriorate both because of escalation on the DRV side and inadequate GVN political and organizational countermeasures.

b. That the purpose of US action is to cause the DRV to cease and desist in its program of aggression against the Republic of Viet-Nam.

c. That the DRV will at every stage of US escalation issue warnings and threats. These should be carefully examined for their possible bearing on the DRV's course, but we should be guided only by what we conclude to be the DRV's true intentions.

d. That the DRV can count on stepped up military material from Communist bloc sources, at least until the Soviets become alarmed about the risk of global war and probably even after that from Communist China.

e. That a significant factor in the DRV's determination of what action to take in response to American military moves will be its assessment of international opinion with respect to the standing of the GVN among its own people. If the predominant international view continues to be that the GVN is an autocratic government of family rule, with little or no roots of popular support, then the DRV is likely to conclude that international reaction to increasing US military "intervention" in Viet-Nam will be distinctly less favorable than it would otherwise be, and the DRV will be strongly tempted to react more vigorously.

2. The following paragraphs show the possible degrees of US escalation and what we estimate the DRV reaction would likely be:

a. Expanded air and naval operations of US units in South Viet-Nam and increased use of MACV ground forces advisors for operational planning and follow-through: The DRV would probably continue present semi-covert measures of infiltration and support of VC as well as creation of additional armed units based on local recruitment (by both coercion and persuasion) and capture of GVN arms. The VC under Hanoi's direction, in addition to continuing activities as in the past, would probably seek to mount incidents designed to affect adversely the image of US assistance to Viet-Nam.

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b. US combat ground forces for garrison or guard duty in South Viet-Nam to bolster Vietnamese morale and/or free GVN guard forces to fight: The DRV would probably continue with measures of the type described above, and might move toward less covert introduction and support of Viet Cong forces, such as a decision to use Northerners and/or Communist bloc arms. If world opinion should react adversely to the US move because of obfuscation of world opinion as to who is responsible for violation of the Geneva Accords (the DRV or the US) and/or an international belief that the US is simply propping up an unpopular government, the DRV might be tempted at this stage to endeavor to establish a "liberation government". However, it remains unlikely that the DRV would move to openly admitted introduction and support of the Viet Cong.

c. Entry of US ground forces into fighting in South Viet-Nam: This would doubtless accentuate the DRV's move toward less covert introduction and support of the Viet Cong, but it might still avoid open admission of its identification with the VC in an effort to obtain the support of international opinion. There would be a greater likelihood of establishment of a "liberation government" since it is more likely that important segments of world opinion would react adversely, and it is quite possible that non-Communist opinion in South Viet-Nam might swing against the US on this move, particularly if US forces in seeking out VC guerrillas erroneously kill innocent Vietnamese instead.

On the other hand, if the DRV military campaign has advanced to Giap's third stage of "general offensive" (where the enemy should be more readily identifiable) and/or if a "liberation government" has already been established and a Communist bloc airlift initiated, then there would be a better possibility for use of US ground forces for fighting without provoking an adverse non-Communist reaction either inside or outside SVN. This may well depend upon the extent to which the GVN has moved in regaining popular support as well as the world view at the time about the onus of responsibility for violating the Geneva Accords.

Use of US ground forces in SVN for fighting would probably put the DRV in an increasingly difficult position between the Soviets and the Chicom. However, it seems doubtful that such a step would cause the DRV to terminate its aggression as the DRV leadership might well calculate that, as long as the conflict is confined to South Viet-Nam, the Russians would not mind seeing the US tied down in a localized fight far from the Soviet Union. With respect to Communist China the DRV leadership might conclude that the risks of Chicom intervention in NVN would be minimal as long as the fighting is confined to SVN.

The DRV would perhaps direct the VC forces in South Viet-Nam to revert to more of a guerrilla status, thus delaying the date of Communist

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take-over in South Viet-Nam, but frustrating the American forces. The game could become one of the patience of the contending forces, with the DRV aware of the political disadvantages which would confront the US forces in a prolonged match.

d. Expanding guerrilla activities in North Vietnam with US support: This would produce a diversion of DRV resources now available for the campaign in South Viet-Nam; and would thus make it more difficult to increase steadily the intensity of that campaign. However, the extent to which a Communist state like North Vietnam is controlled, plus the limitations with respect to assets available to our side to conduct guerrilla activities, mean that such a program, while helpful, in all probability could not be decisive in inducing the DRV to cease or substantially dampen down its efforts to take over South Viet-Nam.

e. US threat to hit selected targets in North Vietnam by air and naval means unless the war in South Viet-Nam is stopped: We believe that under the proper circumstances this US tactic would stand a good chance of achieving its objective without provoking a larger war. (If this threat is made, the US should, of course, be prepared to carry it out if our bluff is called. Otherwise the effect could be disastrous.)

This threat of air and naval bombardment would seem to strike at the very heart of the program laid down by the Lao Dong Party which stated in 1959 that "to take North Vietnam toward socialism is the more urgent task," and in 1960 that "to carry out the socialist revolution in the North is the most decisive task for the development of the whole Vietnamese revolution [and] for the cause of national reunification." It would also strike at what Giap in his book calls the secure base for the "struggle to achieve national unification." The DRV leadership would thus be confronted with the danger of seeing much of its laboriously constructed economic framework crumble and its internal difficulties (such as food shortages) considerably increased.

Such a threat by the US would also appear to bring the DRV leadership up against its desire to avoid involvement in the Russian-Chicom conflict and its fear of Chinese intervention in Viet-Nam. The DRV leadership would thus have to balance against its goal in South Viet-Nam the economic and social progress of the North, the possibility of a struggle between the pro-Soviet and the pro-Chicom factions of the Lao Dong Party, and the possible entry into North Viet-Nam of Chicom forces whose presence would restrict the previous independence of the DRV leaders and whose future withdrawal might be problematical.

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The DRV decision might be influenced by the manner in which the US threat is presented. Quiet presentation through diplomatic channels (perhaps via the USSR) would enable the DRV to save face if it decided to accept. It could also make DRV acceptance easier if knowledge of the threat were kept from the Chicoms, thereby preventing the Chicoms from exerting pressure on the DRV. (It is recognized it may not be possible to keep knowledge from the Chicoms since the pro-Chicom faction in the DRV might deliberately leak the information.)

The DRV decision might also be influenced by international opinion toward the GVN at the time the threat is made. If the GVN's stock in world opinion is as low as at the present time, the DRV might calculate that world opinion would react so adversely to US bombardment of targets in North Vietnam that the US will either be unable to carry out its threat or compelled to cease shortly after action starts.

5. f. US threat to introduce combat ground forces into North Vietnam. This might also achieve the objective of compelling the DRV to cease its aggression against SVN, but there is a good possibility that the DRV might conclude that the US is less likely to carry out this threat than one relating to air and naval bombardment. The threat of ground intervention would also entail greater risk of an appeal by the DRV leadership for Chicom intervention because of fear that the US may intend to supplant the Communist regime and reunify Vietnam by force. Even if the DRV should not appeal to the Chicoms, there would be a greater risk that the Chicoms, if and when they heard of this threat, would move into NVN without being asked in view of the parallel between action of this type and that which took place in North Korea in 1950.

William C. Trueheart

William C. Trueheart
Charge d'Affaires ad interim

Cleared: MAAG - Col. Clarkin
CSA - Mr. Colby (except as noted)

*CAS Station Chief does not believe that either of the threats discussed in the last two subsections would be effective except under conditions of overt war between the DRV and the GVN. Otherwise he believes that the DRV leadership would judge that international opinion would react so adversely that the US would either be deterred from execution of its threat or compelled to cease its military activity against North Vietnam shortly after it starts.