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Thematic Summary: COMMUNIST INTENTIONS AND RESPONSE TO US ACTIONS

1. North Vietnam

From 1961 to the Tonkin Gulf crisis in August 1964, INR maintained that Hanoi's policy-makers were determined to step up the political-military insurgency in the South: they would try to improve and expand military operations by giving greater assistance, but would refrain from a large-scale infusion of native North Vietnamese or regular units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), either on their own initiative or in reaction to an increase in American support for the GVN. In the first place, INR believed, Hanoi felt that neither action was necessary because recruitment in the South was adequate, and because good progress was being made under existing tactics of insurgency. In the second place--a point cited more frequently as INR caught increasing signs that the US was planning for escalation--INR and the rest of the Intelligence Community felt that Hanoi was determined to avoid provoking direct US retaliation against the North.

INR at no time believed that the threat or event of US action against the North would be effective in forcing Hanoi to cease its support of the insurgency or to call off the Viet Cong. A basic assumption, clearly though rarely articulated, was that Hanoi in shaping its policy was moved far more strongly by its reading of the situation in the South than by concern over the effects of direct US action against the North--of course it did not ignore the factors of damage and morale.

When debate in the US government over ^{the advisability of} escalating its effort grew warmer, in the spring of 1964, INR expressed the view that this US action

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possible courses of
When asked to estimate Hanoi's reactions to US escalation during debates of the fall and winter which preceded the decision in February 1965 to begin bombing, INR increasingly departed from the rest of the Intelligence Community in foreseeing no chance that the DRV would actually comply with US demands or even feign to do so. Instead, INR predicted that North Vietnam would react aggressively and might dispatch regular units in force. INR maintained this basic position once the escalation had begun and when new expansions of the strike program were considered. In addition, INR held that Hanoi would be prepared to increase its commitment of forces in the South to whatever levels were necessary to offset the impact of expanded US involvement on the ground, of the sort which followed the decision in July 1965 to send American forces into action.

During 1966 INR continued to question the results of the bombing either in interrupting the flow of men and materiel to the South or in disrupting life in the North, and to doubt that it was effective enough on either count to make Hanoi reconsider its aggressive tactics or its goals in the South. By mid-1967, however, INR detected more concern in Hanoi over the cumulative effects of the bombing, so that it ascribed in part to this worry Hanoi's tentative shifts in its verbal position on negotiations. Nevertheless, INR still believed that vastly increased bombing would not move Hanoi closer to meaningful compromise. When asked to estimate North Vietnamese reactions to such expansions, in the spring of 1967 and again after the Tet offensive of 1968, INR judged that Hanoi,

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backed by China, would up the ante as needed and that the ability of the North Vietnamese leaders to compromise might well be restricted as they became increasingly dependent on China to sustain the war and prevent the collapse of their regime. After President Johnson ordered a partial halt in the bombing, the North Vietnamese made limited concessions in agreeing to talk and, later, in allowing Saigon to participate in exchange for a full bombing halt; INR concluded that the cumulative impact of the bombing clearly had been one important factor in these decisions of the DRV.

2. Communist China

From 1961 until late 1964, INR assessed Peking's role in Vietnam to be primarily one of providing material and political support for Hanoi's conduct of the war. Although it agreed with one 1961 SNIE that US bombing of the North would lead Peking to commit its aircraft to the defense of North Vietnam, INR generally held that China was not likely to intervene directly on a large scale unless the US invaded the North. INR always dismissed direct Chinese involvement in the South as a move that was unnecessary, not wanted by Hanoi, and unduly risky.

In the fall of 1964, evidence mounted that China and the North Vietnamese were planning for joint air defense; at the same time the Chinese beefed up their own defenses in the border area and undertook construction of an airfield at Ningming which was ideally suited for operations over North Vietnam. Looking upon these developments as reactions to plentiful evidence of US planning for strikes against the North, INR grew

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increasingly concerned that Peking might enter a future air war over North Vietnam, particularly if important targets in areas close to China were struck. INR felt that Peking would be motivated more by the political considerations of backing Hanoi and warning the US than by hopes of having any appreciable military impact. The rest of the Intelligence Community did consider Chinese intervention to be distinctly possible and a prospect which could not be ignored in a US decision to bomb the North; INR, however, generally took a view that was even more concerned, estimating that the threshold at which the Chinese would possibly react was lower than the rest of the community thought likely. Similarly, INR believed that the Chinese were more likely to introduce ground forces into North Vietnam as a warning against invasion and as a replacement for North Vietnamese forces going South.

These basic differences continued throughout 1965 and into 1966. Although INR remained in a minority, more components in the community came to share its concern as Chinese engineering, logistical, and anti-aircraft units moved into the North in mid-1965, and, later in the year, joint Chinese-North Vietnamese air defense plans were perfected, and Chinese planes began to act more aggressively in pursuit of reconnaissance missions which entered Chinese air space.

By mid-1966, however, when the Cultural Revolution had engulfed China and US bombings in the Hanoi/Haiphong area had failed to provoke INR had thought likely, the Bureau Chinese intervention, as /modified its position and estimated that the

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Chinese were unlikely to intervene deliberately if the war continued to be waged along these current lines. Nonetheless, INR felt it was still true that Peking was committed to keeping North Vietnam both viable and capable of prosecuting the war. Thus a greatly intensified US bombing program would, in INR's view, increase the chances that the conflict would gradually slip into a confrontation between the US and China as Peking sought to fulfill its commitment and the United States sought to bring Hanoi to heel. In the event of US invasion of the North, INR judged that Chinese ground forces were likely to intervene, although they might not actually engage US forces if the invasion appeared to be a limited action. In any event, INR estimated that escalation of this sort by the US probably would result in expanding Chinese influence and control in Hanoi, producing an even more intransigent North Vietnamese position on negotiations and thus limiting the chances of a compromise solution. Short of this situation, INR believed that Peking would try to discourage talks but not to the extent of applying all the pressure at its disposal; once talks were under way, Peking would reconcile itself to them and try to have a hand in any settlement.

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