IV - Time of Decision: November 1963-March 1965.

Background:

Under Diem's successors, political stability became manifestly a transitory state of affairs as ensuing governments stumbled from one crisis to another; it was equally clear that the regime was making no lasting progress against the Communists even though US support increased and the fighting grew more intense and widespread. What was not so clear was the extent to which the situation was deteriorating, or the reasons for this trend. Nor was the US able to find effective formulas to strengthen the government, or to make its own military action against the VC more effective without diminishing South Vietnamese initiative.

During this period, US government opinion shifted drastically from optimism over progress to pessimism over prospects under the existing ground rules of the war. Anxieties were compounded for the US at the outset when it became evident that, as INR had consistently warned, the information furnished by the Diem government and on which the US had based its policy, had been inaccurate and misleading.[1] Between December 1963 and May 1964, Secretary McNamara made three fact-finding trips to assess the situation. In the chaotic political situation, US support became more than ever clearly indispensable to the survival of the GVN; for some time it even became more particularly identified in the public view with the political survival of Khanh.

---

1. See, for example, Section II above, note 6, and especially note 11.

As joint US/GVN military efforts within South Vietnam produced no signs of sustained progress, attention turned increasingly toward Northern leadership and support for the Communist insurgency and consideration of means to curtail it. In March 1964, Secretary McNamara recommended against bombing the North for the time being, but ordered that steps be taken to make possible the launching of a program of air strikes on 30 days notice. Subsequently, studies were made of the probable results of air action and reactions to it. As we later learned, Hanoi probably had decided in the spring of 1964 to send its own forces into the South. The first units arrived in the late fall of 1964; it was March 1965 before this move became evident to us.

Meanwhile, an expansion of the theater of overt operations was occurring in response to events outside of South Vietnam. In late May 1964, Pathet Lao advances in Laos produced a request from Souvanna Phouma for US reconnaissance flights over the Plaine des Jarres; after two aircraft had been downed by ground fire, the US flew a retaliatory strike against enemy batteries and authorized subsequent flights to return fire. In addition, intelligence collection against North Vietnam was intensified, and the GVN, with help from the US, undertook a stepped-up program of covert (including maritime) operations against the North. These actions, in parallel with calculated warnings reported in the press, were designed to be "signals" foreshadowing to Hanoi more dire actions should North Vietnam refuse to dampen the Lao and South Vietnamese conflicts. In early August, after two engagements between North Vietnamese

torpedo boats and US naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin, the US made a retaliatory airstrike against naval facilities in North Vietnam. Following the reprisal, the US Congress approved a resolution empowering the President "to take all necessary measures...to prevent further aggression."

During this period, the US did not seek a negotiated settlement; indeed, it made efforts to avoid any negotiations which might involve South Vietnam even indirectly. Thus, the US rejected Polish and French proposals during May 1964 for negotiations over the Laotian situation.

In February 1965, a series of spectacular Communist attacks against US installations in South Vietnam coincided with a period of political chaos in Saigon. The US responded with two joint US/RVNAF retaliatory strikes against the North on February 7 and 8; and on March 2, the US launched a program of limited--but continuous and graduated--airstrikes on the DRV which, according to a New York Times backgrounder of March 1, was intended to bring about a negotiated settlement.

"Whether 'tis better...."

The rationale for US airstrikes against the North evolved steadily during this phase. At first, concerned because it was impossible to seal the border of South Vietnam by ground action, the US considered strikes along transportation and communications links in southern North Vietnam and the major passes from Laos as a possible, partial alternative method of stemming Communist infiltration. The Intelligence Community quickly agreed, however, that the political disadvantages of this course would

far outweigh any military gain as long as the Viet Cong continued to be so largely self-sufficient and the fighting remained at the prevailing level.

The question was then raised whether US strikes against targets in the DRV, which would not only cause damage but also demonstrate US determination to prevent a Communist victory in South Vietnam, would persuade Hanoi to call off the insurgents or at least to reduce its support for the war and so bring it to a level manageable for the South Vietnamese. There was general agreement in the Intelligence Community that this program would not persuade Hanoi to stop the war, but most members other than INR thought Hanoi might reduce its support to gain a respite. There was also, however, a general but usually unstated skepticism about South Vietnam's ability to manage the insurgency at whatever level it might remain. Agreement over likely Communist responses to any combination of US actions was rare; nor was there any consensus over the results of merely raising the threat of possible airstrikes. It is ironic that, while the issue over bombing was argued in terms of North Vietnam's role in the South, no one thought of it as a reaction to escalation by Hanoi itself, because no one yet knew that the North Vietnamese had already decided to introduce their own combat units into the South.

The political turmoil after Diem was overthrown suggested the arguments that US strikes against the North might for one thing provide evidence enough of US support to bolster a wobbly government, and might

even galvanize the South Vietnamese into the unified military effort the US had been wanting from the outset. But the Intelligence Community estimated that an initial elation in the South would turn to disillusionment should airstrikes not quickly bring the war to an end. In March 1964, Secretary McNamara rejected a justification of US bombing of the North in terms of its favorable political effects in Saigon. A year later, however, in view of the uncertain situation in SVN, a White House memorandum of February 7, 1965, again raised the proposal as a measure of last resort. The paper estimated that the chances might be anywhere between 25-75% that the proposed strikes would produce satisfactory results either in the South or the North.

Moving on from these marginal prospects, the White House memorandum elaborated a fourth rationale, arguing that, if the Communists should succeed in the face of US airstrikes, the general results to the US of failure in Vietnam would altogether overshadow the particular loss of prestige from failure of the bombing. More positively the memo suggested that direct US action against the North would resolve the fears of other Asian allies--notably the Thais--that the US was unwilling to underwrite an ultimate guarantee against new Communist advances in Asia. This fourth rationale, which was in direct conflict with the conclusion of a May 1964 SNIE,[2] appears to have trumped the argumentation against a decision to bomb the North.

---

2. See below, note 43.

Summary:

The unstable political situation in Saigon held the center of attention during this period, though by no means to the neglect of the discouraging course of the war--and the extent and nature of Hanoi's military effort. These problems in turn intensified debate over a policy of bombing the North and thus stimulated a flow of intelligence appraisals as to the likely effects and consequences of such a policy.

The fall of Diem raised new issues for political intelligence within the perennial framework of stability and war effort. INR judged that the VC had made considerable gains during the last six months of 1963, but held that the trend was in no sense irreversible. It felt that the new Minh-Tho government was making an adequate response and that the keys to progress were unity at the top, a restructuring of administrative machinery, and a full war effort. In this, it was more optimistic than other elements in the Intelligence Community and, conversely, was less impressed by the Khanh regime that soon overthrew Minh. INR judged Khanh to be self-serving and not very competent, lacking political support and even much following within the military; INR considered Minh preferable in all respects as a leader.

The politics of the turbulent Khanh period, as INR viewed them, hinged upon a tension between two key factors--Khanh's desire to perpetuate his power and his need (due to US pressure and his own weak base in the government) to include new political elements in the system. The consequence was a growth of factionalism in military as well as religious and

political circles, which increased the original points of tension. His own moves against political leaders, INR noted, both hurt the US position in Vietnam and further weakened his hold on power. The end of the Khanh era, in INR's judgment, revealed the advantages that might result from a military-Buddhist working relationship, although the elements within each component placed their own goals above the need for political stability. In fact, INR viewed South Vietnam as being in the midst of a genuine non-Communist socio-political revolution, after a long period of repression, with the contest for power broadening out beyond the official community.

In judging the war effort, INR, having already discounted Diem's statistics, was not shocked as much as others by discovering their falsity, and hence did not adopt as pessimistic an outlook. Statistics on the war were, in fact, improving, but those related to external support were in dire need of standardization, as shown by conflicting reports from a variety of military agencies.

At the beginning of the period, INR held that an upsurge in VC activity reflected accumulated strength and not a sudden rise in infiltration. Toward the end of the year, it agreed with other agencies that infiltration for 1964 was above that of the previous year, though still below the 1962 level. When the South Vietnamese raised the claim in the early summer of 1964 that native North Vietnamese units were infiltrating, INR judged the claim unlikely to be true since the action would provide the US with an opportunity to widen the war. It also felt that Khanh was stressing

this issue to strengthen his domestic position. Toward the end of the year and in January 1965, as evidence of a North Vietnamese build-up in south-central Laos mounted, INR and the Intelligence Community continued to think it unlikely that Hanoi would choose to alter drastically the character of the war by sending regular NVA units to fight in the South. INR, however, estimated that Hanoi would probably do so if the United States began a bombing program against the North. In mid-February, as the decision to bomb was being made, there still was no sufficient evidence to show that regular North Vietnamese combat units were already in South Vietnam.

Noting that the Communists had stopped calling for neutralizing South Vietnam, INR suggested that they would return to the proposal only when they were very weak or so strong that it could ease the way to their taking over. Low-level hints of North Vietnamese flexibility and interest in contacts were reported by INR, but it found the evidence insufficient to indicate whether this activity reflected a willingness to consider talks seriously or was simply a desire to ward off escalation without giving much in return.

The issue of bombing the North occupied attention more and more as the period wore on. From the outset, INR estimated that North Vietnam had control enough of the situation to call off the war but was most unwilling to do so, and that it would not do so under pressure of bombing attacks. Reasoning from evidence of North Vietnamese preparations both for resisting direct US attack and for increasing support of the war in

the South, INR felt that Hanoi was determined to persevere in the face of threatened or actual US action. Together, however, with its appreciation of Hanoi's hardline position on this score, INR shared the belief of the Intelligence Community that Hanoi would avoid actions which might give Washington the excuse to strike the North. Thus, INR was surprised by Hanoi's provocative behavior during the Tonkin Gulf crisis; the most plausible explanation seemed to be that Hanoi was determined not to be faced down by what in its eyes were American threats. INR judged that any counteraction by North Vietnam would be to intensify the war in the South; this view accorded with earlier judgments that Hanoi would respond to bombing not with a qualitatively different policy but rather by heightening support for VC operations.

Throughout this period, INR differed from the majority of the Intelligence Community on two important ideas. First, it consistently held that Hanoi was more likely to react aggressively, intensify the war in the South, and even send its own forces South, than to make concessions so as to gain a respite from the bombings. Although few estimators elsewhere in the Community thought that Hanoi would make very significant or lasting concessions, most felt that Hanoi was more likely to moderate the tempo of the war and direct effort into diplomatic channels than to escalate the conflict. Secondly, INR disagreed over the strength and nature of Chinese reactions to US air attacks on North Vietnam; generally, in considering possible US courses of action, and particularly moderate to intense attacks against the North, INR argued that the Chinese were more

likely to enter the war and in greater numbers than other agencies estimated. Most estimates agreed that significant attacks would bring in some Chinese ground forces and that heavy air assaults "might" bring in Chinese air power, but INR argued that heavy attacks "would" evoke Chinese air participation and that even moderately intense air attacks might do so.

In its own analyses, INR followed closely the verbal escalation in Chinese threats which it felt were geared to match those of the US; it judged that their threats reflected a general commitment by the Chinese to assist North Vietnam. It estimated that China would supply aircraft and antiaircraft weapons in the wake of the Tonkin Gulf crisis and, when it did, noted other evidence of Sino-North Vietnamese military cooperation. For the remainder of this period, INR interpreted Peking's warnings and covert acts of military-political preparation to indicate that China was ready to participate in the war in the contingency that the US escalated rapidly and broadly.

The Minh-Tho Government: November 1963-January 1964

The Minh-Tho government enjoyed a period of initial popularity and seeming political stability as it set about dismantling the Diem regime and consolidating its own position. Communist attacks during the first month after the November coup rose substantially, imparting to the indices a trend even more unfavorable to the GVN than they had shown during the last months of the Diem regime. By the beginning of December, however, Communist activities subsided and the GVN had increased operations

sufficiently to suggest more favorable trends. By December, therefore, INR felt that the immediate question was less one of stabilizing a deteriorating security situation than of the regime's establishing rapidly an effective political structure and sustaining progress in the war over an extended period of time.

INR reviewed this situation on December 20, 1963, and concluded that the recent Viet Cong offensive "reflects the still undiminished capability of the Communists to raise the level of their operations." Although in the past half year the Viet Cong had made an over-all gain, it was still too early to evaluate its extent; statistics on the strategic hamlets were incomplete or contradictory, and it was difficult to judge the extent of damage by the Viet Cong, and how far the unfavorable trend of the hamlet program reflected the difference between Diem's misinformation and more realistic appraisals by the new government. The INR paper declared:

> On balance,...we do not believe that the situation is irreversible. While Viet Cong military capabilities have not diminished, neither have the government's. Moreover, the demonstrated ability of the government to increase its response to the Viet Cong...hold[s] considerable promise that the military progress registered against the insurgents prior to mid-1963 will be restored and surpassed ....Much will depend on the ability of the military leadership to subordinate political and personal differences, to act with despatch in completing the new framework of government, and to return full-time to managing the war effort.[3]

A far gloomier assessment was presented at USIB three days later by the Director of Central Intelligence, John McCone, following his trip to

---

3. See IV-1: RFE-102, "Trends in the War Effort in South Vietnam," December 20, 1963

South Vietnam. He had serious doubts about the stability of the new government and its ability to continue favorable war trends. Though the VC could still be overcome, he saw more reason to doubt the outcome than to be optimistic.[4] On January 27, Secretary McNamara told the House Armed Services Committee that the situation remained grave, but that "the survival of an independent government in South Vietnam is so important to the security of Southeast Asia and to the free world that I can conceive of no alternative other than to take all necessary measures within our capability to prevent a Communist victory." Two days later, a military coup led by General Nguyen Khanh removed Minh from power in Saigon.

Riding a Loser: General Khanh's Reign, January 1964 to February 1965

On the day of the coup, INR discussed how valid were the concerns Khanh professed over Minh's failure to restore the momentum of the counterinsurgency effort, and over the possibility that the Minh government might seek a negotiated settlement with Hanoi.[5] INR found no evidence to support Khanh's allegation that the Minh government was considering a bilateral settlement with the North. It judged that Khanh acted from little else than personal ambition, and, in any case, INR considered that Minh would have been more likely to foster military and political progress in SVN. Events partially justified this assessment;

---

4. Minutes of the Meeting: USIB-M-303, December 23, 1963

5. MM-RFE-64-20, "The Coup in Saigon," January 29, 1964

Khanh failed to restore political stability, let alone the momentum of the war, and could not prove charges of neutralism against the Dalat generals.[6]

Under Khanh, while the military situation failed to improve, the political situation once more got out of hand. Where Minh had attempted to form a government of technicians, Khanh (with US prodding) tried to include political elements as well. The result was that factionalism increased, not only within military circles, where Khanh was unable to muster the support Minh had enjoyed, but also among civilian elements, where cleavage now grew along political as well as religious and regional lines. Toward US policy his relationship was contradictory. On the one hand, the US committed itself deeply to Khanh's political survival, and he did make efforts to respond to US requirements for military performance; on the other hand, in doing so he relied increasingly on controls which ran head-on into other efforts which the US was backing to widen the political base of the GVN. And to the extent that Khanh eased controls, he permitted the outbreak of local and national political struggles, in part inherited from Diem's repression and in part reflecting Khanh's lack of stature, in any case disruptive of the war effort.

When in April 1964 student demonstrations broke out in Hue, INR warned that these elements could rally a new wave of dissidence.[7] In August, INR believed that the resumption of demonstrations in Hue

---

6. MM-RFE-64-132, "Implication of the Trial and Punishment of the Vietnamese Generals," June 5, 1964

7. RFE-23, "The Hue University Incident--Symptom of Deeper Problems," April 23, 1964

confronted Khanh with "his most serious challenge to power," to which compromise might not prove an effective response.[8] Further, the anti-American sentiment evident in the demonstrations "may actually reflect dissatisfaction with US support of Khanh" rather than with US support for the war effort.[9]

Although Khanh's restrained response to the demonstrations probably averted wider violence, his fragmented government--a triumvirate of generals--was unlikely to last for long. INR wrote on August 28 that Minh still retained support within the armed forces "and virtually every sector of the Vietnamese society. Therefore, Minh would appear to occupy more of a popular base for national leadership than any other personality in South Vietnam today."[10] During the next two weeks, the triumvirate was dissolved, Minh was elected Chairman of the new Provisional Steering Committee (despite US support for Khanh), and the Dalat generals who had supported Minh were released and returned to active duty.

One of the causes of the crisis, INR believed, had been Khanh's campaign to discredit and neutralize Minh: "Khanh clearly underestimated

---

8. INR's output during the first half of this period was limited while its senior analyst for South Vietnam was detailed to the office of the Secretary's Special Assistant for Vietnam, February to July 1964

9. See IV-2: IN, "Nature of the Current Student-Buddhist Demonstrations in South Vietnam," August 24, 1964

10. See IV-3: IN, "Situation and Immediate Outlook in South Vietnam," August 28, 1964

Minh's public appeal and overestimated his own"; however, INR's further belief that Khanh had "apparently recognized that Minh's continuing leadership role is essential to [his] own survival"[11] did not hold up: within days, Khanh forced Minh into exile in Bangkok.

With Minh gone, INR believed that Khanh's position would become increasingly shaky. As doubts grew whether anyone in South Vietnam could provide the leadership for a successful counterinsurgency effort, an attempt was made to install a civilian government. A proto-legislative body named the High National Council was appointed on September 26, 1964, which elected Pham Khac Suu as Chief of State on October 24. Suu in turn chose Tran Van Huong as Premier. When the Huong cabinet was faced with a similar round of disorders, INR noted that demonstrations had become contests for the representation of conflicting interests rather than protests against specific government controls or acts. Now, even with the support of the military and the High National Council, political stability could not be restored "unless the competing forces feel some confidence that the composition of the cabinet reflects their own interests and aspirations. Given such confidence, it is possible that Huong could survive as the leader of a reconstituted cabinet. Without it, there is little hope that any successor government, civilian or military, could maintain effective power for long."[12]

---

11. See IV-4: IN, "General Minh Returns as Chief of State in South Vietnam," August 28, 1964

12. See IV-5: IN, "Political Crisis in Saigon," November 27, 1964

In any case, INR believed the evidence "clearly indicates that his [Khanh's] support [for the Huong government] is not firm;"[13] when Khanh proved these fears to be justified by dissolving the Council on December 19, 1964, despite strong US support for a civilian government, INR predicted that the move could have "very dangerous repercussions" by giving the Buddhists an exploitable issue they had heretofore lacked in their confrontation with Huong.[14] Later, INR suggested that the Buddhists might even receive support from the army in their attempt to overthrow Huong.[15] And when Khanh removed Suu and Huong on January 27, 1965, in direct violation of an agreement to consult Ambassador Johnson before making any further moves, INR concluded that Khanh's actions had "seriously reduced if not almost eliminated any public respect for US political advice or for those who accept it...and pose the serious question whether Khanh has considered an alternative course, i.e., a negotiated 'neutralist' solution for South Vietnam"[16]—an ironical counterpart to Khanh's original allegations against Minh (see note 5 above).

---

13. See IV-6: IN, "Criticism of General Khanh Could Portend Power Struggle within Armed Forces," December 3, 1964

14. See IV-7: IN, "Military Coup in South Vietnam Dissolves Provisional Legislature," December 20, 1964

15. See IV-8: IN, "Where Are the Vietnamese Buddhists Heading?" January 22, 1965

16. See IV-9: MM-RFE-65-22, "The Situation in South Vietnam: the Quiet Coup," January 27, 1965

On February 3, INR estimated that "the forces against Khanh are strong enough to depose him" provided they remained united.[17] A fortnight later, an attempted military coup failed to set up a new government, but its repercussions in the Armed Forces Council forced Khanh to resign from that body and, shortly thereafter, to depart from the country.

Just before Khanh was overthrown, the Armed Forces Council had set up a new cabinet headed by Buddhist Phan Huy Quat which survived the change. With the establishment of the new cabinet, INR speculated that "South Vietnam's two most powerful forces, the military and Buddhist leaderships, appear to have arrived at a working relationship that may be the opening of a new phase in South Vietnamese politics." However, INR warned, the personal ambitions of leading Buddhists and generals alike were such that "none of them would hesitate at a propitious moment to sacrifice political stability to his desire for personal power."[18]

In essence, INR viewed the Khanh era as inherently unstable. Khanh's greatest asset was his possession of office, but he lacked a solid base, whether in factional adherents, institutional backing, or popular trust. US prodding and his own problems led him to broaden the government's base to include civilians. The explosive factionalism of the period, to be sure, and his own efforts to hold power in so

---

17. See IV-10: MM, "Immediate Prospects in Saigon," February 3, 1965

18. See IV-11: IN, "South Vietnam's New Cabinet: Possible Portent of Greater Stability," February 17, 1965

unsettled a situation generated great difficulties and led to damaging reversals of policy. Nonetheless, while the agitation and pressures that finally overthrew Khanh reflected his own weaknesses, INR also saw in these forces manifestations of a strong underlying demand for a more democratic, responsive government.

In other words, INR was suggesting, the contest for political power between non-Communist elements in South Vietnam had now superseded their concern for the war effort against the Viet Cong. Nor was the contest any longer limited to personalities in and out of the Saigon civil-military bureaucracy. In early February, a SNIE to which INR had contributed much of the substance held that there was now under way in South Vietnam a genuine social and political revolution among non-Communist elements, distinct and apart from the contest with the Communists.[19]

The War and the Question of Infiltration[20]

The political disarray that followed Khanh's coup and the revelation that Diem's statistics of progress had been deliberately misleading swung the pendulum of Washington opinion from guarded optimism to pessimism regarding the outcome of the war. Indeed, the pendulum swung so far that INR, which had been less optimistic than the consensus

---

19. SNIE 53-65, "Situation and Short-Term Prospects in South Vietnam," February 4, 1965. Parts of this Estimate appeared in George A. Carver, Jr., "The Real Revolution in South Vietnam," Foreign Affairs Quarterly, vol. 43, no. 3, April 1965

20. For more detailed version, see Special Annex I

regarding military progress before Diem fell, was now less pessimistic than the consensus about the general outlook and less concerned about the possibility of a South Vietnamese collapse.

Deficiencies in the accuracy, standardization, and relevance of operational statistics on the war in the South were largely overcome through closer cooperation between the US and GVN and a greater US participation in the war. Statistics regarding external support for the insurgency, however, remained incomplete and unreliable because assets were lacking to acquire them, prisoners were inefficiently exploited, and there was an inherent lag, usually of 6 months, between infiltration and detection. Views diverged increasingly over the impact and extent of external support, and this issue gained importance as the counterinsurgency effort failed to make progress, as measures to reverse the tide were debated, and as the US government began to argue over attacks on the North.

Estimates in 1964 of infiltration for previous years based on evidence available were roughly as follows:

1959-60	4,500
1961	6,000
1962	12-13,000
1963	8,000

Lacking its own independent sources of information, the Intelligence Community weighed as best it could the reliability of the evidence available, and then debated the implications of infiltration trends for the progress of the war and for assessing Hanoi's intentions.

In December 1963, INR maintained the position that the sources for estimating external support were still inadequate and could be improved. What figures were available from MACV showed a lower number of infiltrators for 1963 than for 1962; INR concluded that the effects of external support remained qualitative rather than quantitative and that the VC continued to depend on indigenous recruitment. The sharp increase in Viet Cong activities following Diem's downfall stemmed from strength gradually accumulated rather than from any recent upsurge in infiltration.[21]

The question of infiltration assumed new dimensions in the early summer of 1964 when Khanh began to claim publicly that a major build-up of Communist forces in South Vietnam included regular units of the NVA. He threatened a "March North" in retaliation. MACV in fact reported that Viet Cong activity had increased in the northern provinces and that two recently captured Viet Cong had proved to be native North Vietnamese rather than, like prisoners captured hitherto, South Vietnamese regrouped to the North after the settlement of 1954. INR still maintained, however, that the increased strength in men and weapons now being reported was the result of past infiltration rather than a recent increase. Like MACV, INR contended that the appearance of North Vietnamese among the Viet Cong did not signify the introduction of regular NVA units. Moreover, INR felt that Hanoi wished to avoid "provoking" US escalation: thus, "in addition to the absence of proof

---

21. See IV-12: MM-RFE-63-171, "Viet Cong Infiltration," December 10, 1963

to support GVN charges, the logic of the present situation suggests that North Vietnam is unlikely to introduce regular units into the South except in response to US escalation lest such a move would provide an excuse for our widening the war."[22]

INR further suggested that, whereas Khanh might well have believed that Hanoi had infiltrated units in reaction to US threats to extend the war, it was "also possible that Khanh has taken advantage of this evidence...to strengthen pressures for an early escalation of the war." Operating from a difficult military and political position at home, he would be aware that the "direct commitment by the United States that would be required for a move north would obviously strengthen Khanh's prestige and political position."[23]

The GVN continued to claim that infiltration was increasing and included regular NVA units. In early October, the GVN sent a letter to the ICC charging that two regular NVA companies had entered the northern province of Quang Tri. On October 8, the US Press Attache in Saigon stated publicly that there had been an increase in infiltration during 1964. With no independent source of information, INR reviewed the

---

22. See IV-13: IN, "Khanh's Claims on Increased North Vietnamese Infiltration," July 17, 1964. The "logic" of the situation changed in August after the Tonkin Gulf incidents. INR then suggested that Hanoi might introduce regular units as needed to bolster VC operations, in part as proof that it would not capitulate under pressure. (See page 24; also IV-32: IN, "Hanoi Uses Journalist to Ward Off Further Attacks," August 18, 1964)

23. See IV-13: id.

intelligence available as of October 12, and concluded there was "no evaluated evidence...that infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam has been stepped up recently." Nor was there yet any evidence to support Khanh's claim that regular units of the NVA were present; native northerners had been trained by the NVA and subsequently infiltrated as individuals or small groups to be encadred in VC units.[24]

In mid-October MACV reported that native Northerners accounted for the larger part of the sharply increased flow. INR felt that the new materials made available by MACV did indeed indicate increased infiltration in 1964, but that they could not be used to pin-point the numbers nor to prove Khanh's claim about the presence of units from the North Vietnamese Army. Even so, INR noted, the available evidence did not place infiltration in 1964 above the levels of all earlier years: there was an increase over 1963, but the 1964 level seemed to fall below that of 1962.[25]

During October and November, the Intelligence Community maintained the estimate that Hanoi probably would continue to avoid participating

---

24. See IV-14: MM, "Infiltration South Vietnam," October 12, 1964

25. Joint CIA-State-DOD Study of October 31, 1964. By this time, disparities in the definition of terms and in criteria of evaluation among various reporting units had made it impossible to resolve in Washington conflicting reports on infiltration from MACV, let alone differences between MACV and CINCPAC. As a result, a joint State-CIA-DOD committee including a member of INR was sent to Saigon to reach an understanding on future reporting procedures.

more directly in the war in the South; INR alone said that NVA units probably would be sent South if the United States began sustained bombing of the North. The North Vietnamese build-up in central and southern Laos from mid-December 1964 into February 1965 was interpreted by the Intelligence Community as an effort to secure this vital area against increased Lao/US pressure and, possibly, to expand the area of control there in a new offensive during the dry season. Even in February, there was no firm evidence that these NVA forces were destined for South Vietnam—one problem being the general weakness of our intelligence capability, particularly in southern Laos. Although the possibility was raised that these NVA troops might be headed for South Vietnam, it was held unlikely, on the basis of evidence as well as theory that Hanoi wished to avoid giving Washington an excuse to undertake the widely-rumored bombing program. In fact, as was learned subsequently, three NVA regiments had arrived in South Vietnam by the end of February. Thus, as the final debate over the program of air-strikes was under way, it was not known, nor even estimated as likely, that Hanoi itself had already prepared to escalate, if it had not already decided to do so.[26]

Pacification and Sanctuary

INR addressed itself in May 1964 to the pacification program and the question of increasing the number of US cadres. It concluded that

26. For a more detailed discussion of this problem see Special Annex I; also SNIE 10-65, "Communist Military Capabilities and Near-Term Intentions in Laos and South Vietnam," February 4, 1965.

"the situation has shown little progress." Since the GVN had presented the US the opportunity to participate in direction as well as to advise, INR suggested that further US encadrement might be required not only at the provincial level, as proposed, but also at the top levels of command and at the lower district level. The obvious political hazards of such US involvement could be reduced by success and more importantly by the manner in which working procedures were established. "On balance...the gains of this course outweigh its liabilities under existing circumstances."[27]

Although allowing that the introduction of munitions from Cambodia had probably increased in 1963, INR maintained the position it had held since 1962 that their use of Cambodia was of limited significance to the Viet Cong.[28] In a review of the situation, INR concluded that both the advantages and the disadvantages of some form of UN presence on the Cambodian border would be insufficient to warrant the US pressing or resisting such a proposal.[29]

Negotiations--Prospects and Perils

During most of this period, the US considered the situation in the South to be so precarious that any diminution of the total war effort--let alone a political settlement involving neutralization--would provide

---

27. See IV-15: MM-RFE-64-125, "Encadrement of United States Advisors in Vietnam," May 30, 1964

28. See IV-16: MM-RFE-64-76, "Viet Cong Use of Cambodian Territory," April 15, 1964

29. See IV-17: MM-RFE-64-108, "UN Presence on the Vietnam-Cambodian Border," May 15, 1964

the Communists with ultimate if not immediate control over South Vietnam. For their part, the Communists held the public position that no settlement would be possible until the US had withdrawn.

In January 1964, INR noted that both Hanoi and the NLF had, since Diem's downfall, dropped the subject of an international conference to neutralize South Vietnam, and estimated that Hanoi would be unlikely in the near future to pursue neutralization unless the Viet Cong appeared to be stalemated or, alternatively, "it appeared that the Viet Cong was in a sufficiently strong bargaining position and that Washington wished to drop its commitment to Saigon gracefully." Under the second alternative, "the North Vietnamese would insist on NFLSV participation and on parallel internal talks to form a coalition government. While deactivating but not disbanding the Viet Cong organization, Hanoi and the NLFSV would frustrate any effective international means of control. This formula would be viewed as an interim step toward reunification under Hanoi's auspices."[30]

By the late summer of 1964, prospects in the South had grown so dim that some authorities in the US Government felt the situation could be salvaged only with a respite from Communist attacks. Some of them argued that US retaliatory strikes against the North would provide this respite. As this debate went on into the late fall, Western journalists reported statements from Wilfred Burchett and a North Vietnamese official in Phnom Penh to the effect that the NLF was ready to negotiate with the

---

30. See IV-18: RFE-3, "Communist Attitudes Toward Neutralization for South Vietnam," January 20, 1964

GVN, that reunification could be delayed, and that US withdrawal could follow rather than precede the establishment of a neutral coalition government. INR noted that these terms differed from those of the past only regarding the flexibility allowed for the timing of the US withdrawal. The feelers, INR estimated, "seem mainly intended to encourage others to think that a negotiated settlement is feasible...and probably also to smoke out some response in Washington and Saigon." Noting the ambiguous authority of the contacts, INR suggested that these hints "may be made more directly if Hanoi sees a growing threat of US escalation and an increasing deterioration of the government position in the South."[31] Later, in reviewing Edgar Snow's account of his interview with Mao in January 1965, INR suggested that, while the Chinese were more positive toward negotiations than they had been in the past, Mao's hints of flexibility on a US military presence in South Vietnam appeared intended more to forward the prospect of a conference than to outline possible concessions.[32]

Following the two retaliatory strikes on February 7 and 8, 1965, INR noted that both Hanoi and Peking had privately made the point that they could not call for a conference under US threats of escalation.[33]

---

31. See IV-19: IN-MM-RFE-64-244, "Communists Hint Interest in South Vietnam Settlement," November 20, 1964

32. See IV-20: IN, "Mao Tse-tung Discusses Possible Conference on Vietnam," February 12, 1965

33. See IV-20: id.

However, INR interpreted an article of February 14 in Nhan Dan to mean that "the North Vietnamese may perhaps be reconsidering their previous reluctance to join any conference on Vietnam."[34]

As this period ended, INR reviewed the Communist positions on negotiations. It observed that Hanoi had maintained some flexibility but "seems very sensitive...to the fact that any interest in negotiations might be interpreted as a sign of weakness and as indicating an intention to call off the Viet Cong."[35] The evidence available could not support even tentative conclusions about what might be gained or lost by negotiating.[36] INR also observed that, to the extent the Communists showed flexibility, they might merely be hoping to stave off US escalation without making any concessions.

To Bomb or Not to Bomb--No Decision

The first significant review of the ramifications that might spring from actions against the North was undertaken in late February 1964 by the Department's Policy Planning Council (S/P). The Council asked INR

---

34. See IV-21: MM-RFE-65-51, "Possible North Vietnamese Interest in an Indochina Conference," February 15, 1965

35. See IV-22: MM-RFE-65-63, "Peiping-Hanoi Attitudes Toward Negotiations," February 23, 1965

36. It was not until mid-March, after the bombing began, that INR learned (and then only fragmentarily) that U Thant had communicated to Ambassador Stevenson Hanoi's September agreement (through the Russians) to meet US representatives in Rangoon; no agenda were outlined, and Washington's final negative reply was not given to Thant until January 1965.

and CIA/ONE to contribute thoughts on Communist reactions and how some factors, such as fear of the Chinese and control over the Viet Cong, might affect Hanoi's behavior. S/P asked as a key issue whether or not Hanoi could put an end to the conflict if it chose. INR judged that it could, although compliance by the VC might be neither immediate nor total. INR went on, however, to say: "We feel...that a more realistic and important question to be posed is not the DRV's capability to call off the war in the South, but its willingness...[and] we are not confident that the DRV would call off the war."[37]

Considering the possibility of a higher level of covert actions against the North or overt action by the US and its allies in South Vietnam and Laos, the paper said that "we are not sanguine that...[they] would cause the DRV to call off the war." In the case of air strikes against the North, "Communist reaction would probably stop short of extreme responses," and it seemed "more likely" that the DRV "might greatly heighten its support of VC and Pathet Lao efforts to take over their countries."[38] As for the ability of North Vietnam to carry on under bombing, INR was clear, saying that "pin-pointed bombing would seriously--if not critically--affect the urban economy...[but] by reliance on the self-sufficient agricultural life of the villages it is likely that basic economic life would go on and necessary support for the regime's military and governmental structure would be maintained."[37]

---

37. See IV-23: INR/CIA Contribution to S/P Paper, February 27, 1964

38. See IV-24: id.

The paper saw considerable likelihood that the Communists would opt for political action, including pressure to reconvene the Geneva Conference, with the object of "forestalling US action." Since this objective "would be met simply by convening a conference, we doubt that either Peiping or Hanoi would make any significant concessions for an overall settlement...."[39]

Evaluation of Hanoi's and Peking's Policies

The overthrow of Diem and the Viet Cong's relatively poor success in taking advantage of it provoked policy reappraisals in Hanoi. In January 1964, it was revealed that the Central Committee had met in December 1963 and adopted militant, pro-Chinese positions on issues in the Sino-Soviet conflict. In addition, as the Intelligence Community learned gradually and belatedly, the leadership at this meeting also opted for a more aggressive effort in the South, probably contemplating even then that they might have to send in North Vietnamese army units, if they did not actually decide to do so. In mid-February 1964, INR analyzed a spate of North Vietnamese articles concerning the Vietnam conflict: all seemed to rule out diplomatic action in favor of incessant military pressure in the South, and one called for greater contributions to the war effort by North Vietnam. INR interpreted one article as evidence that Hanoi would, in the face of prolonged US involvement, increase its participation with manpower and materiel, but that its leaders considered "vastly increased North Vietnamese participation in

39. See IV-25: id.

the South, particularly with regular units, not only unnecessary but unwise." A similar view was shared by the Intelligence Community in an estimate of March 4 on North Vietnam:[40] "We believe that Hanoi will not undertake an invasion or even a major covert commitment of DRV military units; we see no indication that the DRV leaders are disposed to stimulate drastic US counteraction." The SNIE held that Hanoi might increase the pressure, but would confine the effort to steps such as an increase in VC aggressiveness supported by better and heavier weapons and including heightened terrorism in the cities.

INR also felt that Hanoi was genuinely concerned that the United States might carry the war to North Vietnam, and it believed that Hanoi was seeking mutual defense arrangements with Peking as well as assurances from Moscow, apparently with success in the first effort but failure in the second. In mid-April, INR wrote of the North Vietnamese regime's efforts to prepare its populace for possible attack and for greater support of the war in the South; the first evidence of preparations against air attacks was also reported at this time. In general, INR interpreted the intelligence on North Vietnam as indicating reactions to threatened US retaliation rather than policy initiatives generated by Hanoi.

---

40. This estimate, SNIE 14.3-64, was used by CIA and INR to focus attention on the generally poor state of intelligence reporting on North Vietnam and the Viet Cong and to press for improvement from all sources. The effort went on for over a year under the direction of a USIB committee with INR's active participation, and considerable improvement did occur.

Washington's "signals" and semi-official press "leaks" provoked warnings and defiance not only from Hanoi but also from Peking, which INR discussed in a number of papers. For example, an IN on March 3 interpreted Peking's expressions of support to suggest Chinese "readiness to match vague US threats with parallel political escalation of an equally suggestive but threatening nature."[41]

Debate over Bombing: The Second Round

Renewed consideration of attack on the North occurred at Honolulu in early June 1964, and the proposal was again rejected. On the eve of the conference, INR prepared a list of key questions,[42] which implicitly denied that the strategy of "winning with bombs" would succeed. The Intelligence Community also was asked to consider the consequences of graduated air and naval attacks against the DRV and Communist-held Laos up to "strikes (if necessary) on a growing number of military and economic targets in the DRV." The purpose of the proposal was both to induce a major reduction of Viet Cong activity and to persuade Hanoi to respect the Geneva Agreement in Laos. In South Vietnam, increased military aid was envisaged as well as the introduction of "substantial additional US personnel infused in GVN military and administrative establishments."

---

41. See IV-26: IN, "Peiping Expresses 'Unqualified Support' for North Vietnam but Avoids Specifics," March 3, 1964

42. See IV-27: Memo to Acting Secretary, "Key Questions with Respect to Action Against North Vietnam," May 20, 1964

Responding with a Special National Intelligence Estimate, the Community estimated that, initially, Hanoi would seek a conference and might reduce the level of the insurrections in order to end the US actions. The USIB was "unable to set any meaningful odds" for the course which the North Vietnamese might follow if the attacks were broadened in spite of this effort, but "incline[d] to the view that they would lower their terms for a negotiated settlement."[43] Nevertheless, there would be "a significant danger that they would fight, believing that the US would still not be willing to undertake a major ground war, or that, if it was, it could ultimately be defeated by the methods which were successful against the French."

The Estimate emphasized Peking's caution in risking open hostilities with the United States and, with a confidence never seen again, concluded that there "would probably not be high risk of Chinese Communist ground intervention unless major US/GVN ground units had moved well into the DRV or Communist-held areas of northern Laos, or possibly, the Chinese had committed their air [force] and had subsequently suffered attack on CCAF bases in China."[44] The USIB did not think there was much risk that Peking would commit its air force.

---

43. See IV-28: SNIE 50-2-64, "Probable Consequences of Certain US Actions with Respect to Vietnam and Laos," May 1964. Curiously the body of the paper did not use such an optimistic formulation, saying less precisely that "they would still seek a negotiated outcome" but not speculating about whether or not they would compromise to do so.

44. See IV-28: id. Emphasis added.

The SNIE also addressed itself to the question of the longer-range consequences of the proposed actions. A "clear-cut" success (which it had implied was improbable) would simply allow time for "constructive action" to deal with the Communist threat. "On the other hand, to the degree that the consequences of the US action were ambiguous or unsuccessful, there would almost certainly be a strong tendency for morale and discipline in South Vietnam and Laos to deteriorate rapidly--perhaps more rapidly than if the US had not begun its intensified effort. Such deterioration would be felt generally through non-Communist Asia."[45]

INR observed in a number of papers that Hanoi gave every indication of being prepared to risk some retaliation in pressing the attack in South Vietnam. In June, INR reported North Vietnamese counterthreats that US attacks on the North would trigger an all-out Viet Cong drive, and noted that Northern preparations against air attacks and raids by agents had been intensified.

INR also believed that the Chinese Communists, seriously concerned about the US moves, were "determined to respond initially at a similar verbal level, without overreacting belligerently." INR analyzed the escalating Chinese verbal threat on several occasions in July; it viewed Peking's statements as an effort to deter the United States by raising the likelihood of Chinese involvement in response to US action against the North, while at the same time avoiding a commitment to a specific

---

45. See IV-28: id.

course of action. INR took the Chinese warnings more seriously than did most other intelligence agencies, and felt that the statements also "probably" reflected "an actual commitment" made by the Chinese to Hanoi "under which they undertake in at least general terms to assist the DRV."[46]

The Tonkin Gulf[47]

Although INR attributed to Hanoi a hard position on compromise and a strong determination to win in the South, it felt that Hanoi would avoid a clearcut provocation which could trigger American air attacks against the North. Thus INR--as well as the rest of the Intelligence Community--was unprepared for the August incidents in the Tonkin Gulf.

It was possible to explain the August 2 attack on the Maddox as a retaliation for an action on July 30-31 by GVN forces as part of their covert maritime operations (MAROP), and INR suggested that Hanoi may have viewed the Maddox patrol as a follow-up to that raid. Moreover, INR warned: "It seems likely that such a coincidence of operations may again provoke limited DRV acts of military retaliation."[48] Another explanation,

---

46. See IV-29: Memo to the Acting Secretary, "Peiping Strengthens Implicit Commitment to Defend North Vietnam," July 9, 1964

47. See Special Annex II for greater detail

48. See Special Annex II. As INR learned later, there had been another covert maritime action on August 3-4, although this time even farther from the area of the Maddox-Turner Joy patrol. Thus, this assessment--and warning--may have proved valid, although given Hanoi's position that the Turner Joy/Maddox was a US hoax, there is no evidence that Hanoi drew the connection.

INR suggested, may have been that Hanoi wanted to demonstrate that it would not be faced down by American threats. This motive would explain the decision Hanoi seems to have made to skirmish with the Maddox and the Turner Joy on the night of August 4, after President Johnson's warning of the day before against further incidents. INR reasoned that Hanoi's leaders probably felt they must either act again or risk appearing cowed by US pressure. Chinese statements and patterns of behavior indicated to INR that, far from urging restraint on Hanoi in the interim between the two incidents, Peking, if consulted, was "more likely" to have supported Hanoi's aggressive decision.[49] This analysis, of course, assumed that the second incident had been a deliberate North Vietnamese attack: INR concluded at the time that it had and maintained this judgment shortly thereafter in a review of the incidents. In response to questions raised in 1967 over the episode, INR produced another study which found that the evidence available--although circumstantial--supported this conclusion.

When the US ordered retaliatory strikes, INR prepared a memorandum for the Secretary outlining likely reactions.[50] It predicted that the North Vietnamese would defend themselves to the limit of their capabilities and also would call on the USSR and China for defensive assistance. Further, INR felt that the main counter-reprisals would occur in the

---

49. See IV-30: RM, RFE-56, "Peiping and Hanoi: Motivations in Gulf of Tonkin Crisis," August 6, 1964

50. See IV-31: Memorandum for the Secretary, "Probable Foreign Reactions to the US Strike," August 4, 1964

South in the form of increased VC activity, since "Hanoi will be under strong pressure to demonstrate that the attacks on the North will not halt Viet Cong action...." Peking's reaction, the paper held, would be directed toward demonstrating its support and raising pressures against further escalation while leaving room for negotiations or further graduated responses as deemed necessary. Although INR misjudged in assuming that Peking would publicize its actions, the paper did predict correctly that the Chinese would send to North Vietnam jet aircraft and ground anti-aircraft equipment, together with advisers. INR did not envisage ground movements into North Vietnam, but did suggest that Peking "would communicate evidence of mobilizing moves within China" to build "concern over the threat of ground intervention."

Aftermath of Tonkin: Hanoi and Peking Warn Against Escalation

Soon thereafter, INR reported efforts by Hanoi and Peking to deter further US attacks by raising the spectre of an offensive in the South and possible Chinese involvement in the North. It did not consider overt North Vietnamese intervention in the South likely but predicted that "Hanoi will probably increase covert infiltration, possibly including some regular units for later use if needed."[51] INR felt that the North Vietnamese leaders expected new attacks on the North, particularly if the GVN position further deteriorated, and that they favored increased

---

51. See IV-32: IN, "Hanoi Uses Journalist to Ward Off Further Attacks," August 18, 1964

Viet Cong operations rather than any stand-down.[52] Chinese warnings also were more threatening, though typically imprecise. INR felt that both Hanoi and Peking had advanced their contingency preparations for action in the event a new crisis arose. INR reported "tentative indications"[53] of Chinese preparations for greater involvement.

What might have become a second Tonkin Gulf crisis occurred on September 18, when another DeSoto patrol vessel, going back for the first time since the August affair, reported it was under attack. The bulk of INR's work on this incident was done in special channels. There was considerable controversy over whether or not the encounter actually happened. In any event, the despatch of the patrol had not been coordinated through intelligence channels, even though the mission was ostensibly justified as intelligence collection, and INR learned of the plan only after it had been approved. After the incident, INR questioned the value of the patrols in light of the risks and also because other means were available to collect much the same intelligence. In late November, when the Pentagon again proposed that the DeSoto patrols be resumed, INR similarly questioned their worth in light of the risks;

---

52. In fact, in an oral briefing of DOD Assistant Secretary McNaughton and Assistant Secretary Bundy on August 21, an INR representative predicted that Hanoi would order a VC attack on the US bombers at Bien Hoa air base in retaliation for the Gulf of Tonkin strikes and as an added demonstration of their defiance of the escalation threat. The attack took place on November 1.

53. See Special Annex III

indeed, the resumption of such patrols "may very well trigger an incident either through design or mutual miscalculation which could face us with the question of reprisals." The patrols were not resumed.

Escalation Reconsidered

A program of attacks against North Vietnam was considered formally again by the Intelligence Community in a SNIE published in October 1964.[54] In the initial stages, USIB held, the Communists "probably" would attempt to dissuade the US by a mixture of moves, "including some apparent concessions to US wishes." If these moves failed to stop the attacks, all intelligence agencies except INR "inclined to the view" that Hanoi's leaders would order a temporary halt in Viet Cong attacks, would "press for a negotiated cease-fire in the South and try to promote an international conference" albeit without making "any meaningful concessions." These agencies did, however, agree in the SNIE that there was "substantial danger" that Hanoi would react aggressively; INR went further and in a footnote expressed its belief that North Vietnam "would" choose the aggressive course. INR expected Hanoi to feel that the prize to be won by "all-out attacks" would outweigh any damage to be suffered from continued air attacks, and that any concessions would only invite further strikes and at the same time undermine Viet Cong morale; INR therefore predicted that North Vietnam "would carry on the fight and proceed to send its own armed forces on a large scale to Laos and South Vietnam."

---

54. See IV-33: SNIE 10-3-64, "Probable Communist Reaction to Certain US/GVN Courses of Action," October 9, 1964

USIB agreed that if the aggressive course were pursued the Chinese would "probably" introduce "limited numbers" of Chinese ground troops "both to prepare for further escalation and to make clear Peking's commitment to assist the North Vietnamese." The Estimate expressed "doubt" that Peking would commit units of its air force. It still argued, though more cautiously than in the spring, that there would not be a "high risk" that Chinese forces would be introduced on a "large scale" unless "major US/GVN ground units" had moved to "occupy" areas of the DRV or Communist-held northern Laos, or "possibly" unless the Chinese had committed air units and suffered retaliatory attacks. As in May, USIB held that if the bombing succeeded in halting outside support, the effect would be only to gain time for the US to continue its efforts to establish a "viable regime" in the South and to deal with the "indigenous Viet Cong insurgency;" this time USIB did not address itself to the consequences if the program failed.

The Situation Reappraised

A major review of the Vietnam situation was undertaken in October and November of 1964. The basic policy study, prepared by Assistant Secretaries Bundy and McNaughton, favored a program of rapid strikes against the North as riskier but more likely to achieve US objectives than a graduated escalation. The papers viewed even slow escalation as preferable to doing "more of the same," because even if the escalatory course ended in the loss of South Vietnam, "our having taken stronger measures would still

leave us a good deal better off with respect to the confidence and willingness to stand firm of the nations in the next line of defense in Asia." This judgment stood in marked contrast to the conclusion of the May SNIE.[55]

In commenting, at Mr. Bundy's request, on the paper's discussion of graduated escalation (without having the rest of the study), INR reiterated its judgment that Hanoi would respond aggressively and that Chinese ground units might be introduced into North Vietnam. It also expressed concern about the plan's position against negotiations in the early stages, because if we later agreed to negotiate we would make it appear that we were negotiating from weakness and as a result of failure to achieve Hanoi's submission. INR proposed, but never received a response to, still another approach: that the US position a strike-force in the South China Sea (including some Marines at DaNang), and occupy some strong-points in Laos to safeguard the Mekong. These moves, INR felt, would strengthen the US commitment and threaten escalation "to increase Hanoi's incentive to negotiate on our terms" without setting us irrevocably on an escalatory course we might not be prepared to carry through.[56]

In this late Fall of 1964, the Intelligence Community also was asked for its views on the situation in South Vietnam, and for estimates of the likely effects of and reactions to escalations of the war as

---

55. See IV-28: SNIE 50-2-64

56. See IV-34: MM-REA-64-236, "Comment on Draft Analysis of 'Option C'," November 10, 1964

outlined in the Bundy-McNaughton paper.[57] This effort was limited to CIA, DIA and INR, which formed a working group of the National Security Council chaired by CIA's ONE. After many drafting sessions, a joint paper emerged, with two footnoted dissents by INR.[58] The paper said that moves in the lower range of the option for escalation, meaning air strikes against selected targets, aerial mining of certain DRV ports, and the imposing of a naval quarantine blockade, "probably" would cause the DRV to "make some moves toward apparent compliance"[59] but not to make "any early significant concessions." Under these circumstances, DIA and CIA "doubted" that Peking would commit units of its air force, but INR footnoted its view that "increasingly severe U.S. strikes above the 19th parallel would probably evoke the employment over North Vietnam of Chinese air from Chinese bases." All agreed that this action would "probably" occur in response to the upper level of graduated escalation included under "Option C"--attacks on the balance of the 94 targets on the JCS "list" and operations to seize coastal lodgments in the DRV.

---

57. The Intelligence Community was never asked to consider the consequences of continuing with "more of the same" sorts of US action, nor did INR explore it independently. However, RFE told the Director that the prospects did not seem as barren as described in the Bundy paper and also commended a paper written by Robert Johnson of S/P, giving the case for this option to Assistant Secretary Bundy.

58. See IV-35: INR/CIA/DIA, November 26, 1964

59. INR did not formally disagree with this proposition, although in earlier drafts it had repeated the estimate it had recorded in a footnote to the October SNIE, that North Vietnam was more likely to react aggressively to the middle as well as the upper ranges of the actions contemplated under "Option C."

CIA and DIA felt that, during this phase of the escalation program, Hanoi would increase its efforts to negotiate if Peking had refrained from "extreme rescue measures"--presumably meaning large-scale intervention in North Vietnam or Laos. The course of events in the South, however, was seen as the primary factor that would determine Hanoi's speed in reaching a settlement. In a second footnote, INR disagreed with CIA and DIA on the Chinese issue. INR reasoned that Peking "would feel it necessary to assure Hanoi of its support and to come to Hanoi's assistance as the situation required" and that, therefore, "there is a greater chance" that the DRV would "fight on," involving a "considerable risk" of an invasion of South Vietnam or Laos.

The joint paper also considered the likely response in South Vietnam. The participants agreed that there would be initial elation and a boost in South Vietnamese morale but that it "would almost certainly quickly wane...if the war seemed to drag on despite the new US moves, and especially if the VC were able to increase their military and terrorist pressures."[60] The paper pointed to the likely adverse political reaction elsewhere in the world but dropped the final, prophetic warning of an earlier draft that "the worst situation of all would be...if the US engaged in extended and severe actions against North Vietnam and then failed in its major objective of establishing a viable and lasting non-communist regime in the South."

---

60. See IV-35: INR/CIA/DIA, November 26, 1964

INR's views on the risk of Chinese intervention were based on Chinese warnings and evidence of military preparations. INR still thought that the warnings reflected a generalized commitment not tied to any specific course, but felt the military moves pointed to involvement in air defense. Most ominous hard intelligence was the discovery that the Chinese were constructing on a priority basis an airfield at Ningming just a few miles from the North Vietnamese border; its location made more sense for operations over North Vietnam than over China where it simply duplicated the coverage of another field. INR concluded that construction of this airfield, taken together with recent deployments of Chinese jet fighters to South China and evidence of Sino-North Vietnamese air defense cooperation, "strongly suggests" that the Chinese "may be preparing to provide air defense for the Hanoi-Haiphong area against possible US air attacks."[61]

INR's estimate of North Vietnam's intentions remained much the same as in the fall. In late January 1965, INR noted evidence that the North Vietnamese were less worried over the imminence of direct attacks, but believed that they "view this as a distinct possibility against which they have been preparing their defenses since early last spring, while making it clear that the prospect of such attacks is not leading them to alter their plans for South Vietnam."[62] The rest of the Intelligence Community, in a SNIE on February 4, implicitly supported this position.

---

61. MM-RFE-64-257, "New Chinese Communist Airfield Near North Vietnam," November 28, 1964. See also Special Annex III.

62. See IV-36: MM-RFE-65-27, "Hanoi Propaganda on US Operations," January 29, 1965

Escalation Reconsidered and Approved

A systematic program of air strikes was again considered at the highest levels as the South Vietnamese military and political situation deteriorated further, and particularly after the US made strikes against the North on February 7 and 8 in retaliation for Communist attacks on Pleiku and several other US installations. Presidential Assistant McGeorge Bundy wrote in a memorandum from Saigon for the President on February 7 that "without new US action, defeat appears inevitable." Bundy's mission recommended a program of "graduated and continuing reprisal" as "the most promising course available." Acknowledging that the costs in American air losses would be "significant" and that it would be "likely" eventually to require "an extensive and costly effort against the whole air defense system" of North Vietnam, the report nevertheless considered the program "cheap" when measured against the costs of defeat and "even if it fails to turn the tide--as it may--the value of the effort seems to us to exceed its cost." The Bundy mission speculated that the chances for success might be somewhere between 25 and 75 percent. The memorandum held that even if it failed, the program would dampen criticism that the United States had not done all it could and would challenge the sanctuary principle thus helping to deter future Communist insurgency. It did not discuss the possible need for US ground forces.

Although the long-term purpose of the program would be to influence the will of the North Vietnamese leaders, the Bundy mission argued that the "immediate and critical targets" are in the South--"in the minds of

the South Vietnamese and in the minds of the Viet Cong cadres." It predicted an immediate increase in optimism among non-Communist Southerners which would offer an opportunity for increasing American leverage and which "could well" increase the readiness of Vietnamese factions to join in a more effective government. In a memorandum of February 10, INR commented on the weakness of this argument, quoting the November joint CIA-DIA-State paper which unanimously concluded that the initial elation in the South would be followed by a serious let-down if the bombing program failed to lead quickly to success against the Viet Cong.

The INR comments also noted that the report omitted any consideration of Chinese Communist reactions. INR cited recent judgments of the Intelligence Community that the Chinese were likely to involve themselves at some stage of the escalatory process. INR also pointed out the Intelligence Community's more pessimistic treatment of free world reaction. Bundy's memo considered only briefly the impact on Hanoi's "will," and INR's comment did not mention its own doubts or those of the Intelligence Community regarding the effectiveness of bombing in this regard.

After the Bundy memo, two more SNIEs were produced on Communist reactions to a systematic bombing program. The first Estimate, published on February 11,[63] dealt at length with Soviet reaction, predicting diplomatic pressure and military assistance and seeing about an even chance that some SA-2 installations would be provided. Hanoi, it was estimated, "almost certainly" would not restrain the Viet Cong in the early stages, but the chances of a reduction would improve if the US persevered and

63. See IV-37: SNIE 10-3-65, "Communist Reactions to Possible US Actions," February 11, 1965

inflicted increasing damage on North Vietnam. INR took no footnote to this rather optimistic view, which conflicted with both its previous stand and the position taken a week later. USIB concluded that there was a "fair chance" that limited numbers of Chinese ground forces would be introduced into North Vietnam, but the majority thought that, even if the US inflicted "severe damage" on the North, Peking "probably" would not send large-scale ground forces. INR disagreed with this statement, believing that the chances were "considerably higher." The Estimate said that Peking "might" react to strikes against northern North Vietnam with fighters from Chinese bases; continuing to take a more alarmist view of Chinese moves and of the evidence of Sino-DRV cooperation, INR felt that China "would probably" do so.

A supplemental Estimate a week later dealt with the consequences of limited "tit-for-tat" strikes and of a declared, sustained program of bombing.[64] There was general agreement that the first course would have little effect. On the second course, all participants except INR repeated their prediction in the October SNIE that it was "more likely" that Hanoi would make some concession to obtain a respite, without completely abandoning support for the Viet Cong, than that it would opt for increasing the level of warfare. INR disagreed, considering that the increase was more likely, and that the "probable" Chinese commitment of its fighters to defend major North Vietnamese targets would reinforce Hanoi's persistence, whatever the US response to the Chinese action.

---

64. See IV-38: SNIE 10.3/1-65, "Communist Reactions to Possible US Course of Action Against NV," February 18, 1965

The Estimate also suggested that Hanoi was unlikely to respond with a large-scale invasion of South Vietnam and/or Laos, but would consider that it was unnecessary and involved too great an expansion of the Chinese role and risk of a major destruction in the North. INR, on the contrary, predicted that once US attacks on the Hanoi-Haiphong complex destroyed major industrial and military targets, North Vietnam would "probably" send its own armed forces "on a large scale" to Laos and South Vietnam in the belief that the US either would not meet them on the ground or could be defeated in a protracted war. Further, INR felt that Peking would back Hanoi by introducing limited numbers of Chinese ground forces to underline its commitment and prepare for further escalation.

INR continued to highlight the threatening nature of Peking's statements and to report evidence of military preparations. It interpreted repeated Chinese promises of assistance "with the strong implication of direct involvement of their own forces" as committing "their prestige to a more vigorous response to any future escalation."[65]

---

65. See IV-39: IN, "Tough Chinese Communist Posture on Vietnam," February 19, 1965