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VI - A Massive Effort to Turn the Tide: February 1966 - April 1968.

Background:

When the bombing pause of 37 days in December 1965 and January 1966 failed to produce negotiations, the US resumed and intensified its strikes against the North. Clearly, US military power by itself had not succeeded in forcing either a military or a negotiated solution. It was thus plainer than ever that the establishment of a viable government in Saigon was crucial if the war was not to extend indefinitely in time and scope--and perhaps to include a conflict with China.

Consequently, the US launched a massive AID program designed to foster a political, social, and economic revolution in South Vietnam, and laid plans for developing the institutions necessary to consolidate and perpetuate progress along these desired lines. The new program was initiated at the meeting of February 6-8 between President Johnson and Premier Ky at Honolulu. In September 1966, South Vietnam elected a constituent assembly which drafted a new constitution, and a year later held elections for President under the new laws. For the first time since the early days of Diem, the country emerged under a Presidential government which could base its mandate--however shaky--on a credible demonstration of the democratic process.

Throughout this period, the US gave highest priority to the new pacification program, which was based on the reforms originally envisaged by the US, but never effectively pursued. At the same time, increments

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of US and allied troops were steadily added to compensate for increased infiltration of Communist forces from the North. In July 1967 MACV's estimates of Communist strength rose to 294,000, including 50,000 regular North Vietnamese troops; by August 1967, the authorized US troop level rose to 525,000 and those of the ARVN had been raised to 685,000. Casualties on all sides during this period rose at a rate which far exceeded the rate of increase in combatants, testifying to the rapid growth in scope and intensity of the war. US officials had begun to show confidence in the results of the combined military and pacification effort when the Communists launched a spectacular offensive during the Tet holidays of February 1968 which included simultaneous attacks on virtually every major urban center in South Vietnam. The Tet offensive cost the Communists major losses in personnel but it severely reversed most of the gains in the pacification effort.

The prospects that a settlement could be negotiated showed little sign of improvement during most of this period although each side made significant changes in its position. In October 1966, President Johnson reaffirmed his terms that he would halt the bombing only if Hanoi gave indication that it in turn would de-escalate its military activities in South Vietnam; he also promised to withdraw US forces from South Vietnam within six months from the time Hanoi disengaged from the war and the violence "thus subsided." A year later, in his San Antonio speech of September 29, 1967, President Johnson altered the formula so that the bombing could stop "when this would lead promptly to productive discussions." He also modified his requirement for reciprocity by stating

that the US would operate on the assumption that Hanoi would not take advantage of a halt to increase infiltration. These terms were subsequently interpreted by Secretaries McNamara and Clifford to mean that it would be acceptable for the Communists to maintain normal supply operations for their forces in being at the time of the halt.

For its part, Hanoi changed its position regarding negotiations in two respects. Although it had demanded US "recognition" of its Four Points and, less clearly, some recognition of the NLF as preconditions for negotiation, Hanoi soon made it clear that it did not insist on these demands and that the only precondition involved a bombing halt. In January 1967, Hanoi publicly noted that there "could be" talks following a total cessation of bombing, and modified this formula to "would" a year later. On March 31, 1968, the President announced a halt in bombing above the 20th parallel and offered to begin negotiations; when Hanoi agreed to undertake procedural discussions, the way was finally opened to talks.

The questions for the US during this period thus were first, how to create a government with the legitimacy and strength to assume increasing political and military responsibility for the war; second, how to conduct an effective pacification effort; and third, how to get Hanoi to the conference table.

Summary:

The area in which, during this period, the most progress occurred was the stabilizing of the political situation in Saigon, though the effectiveness of the regime remained very much in question. When the Ky

government established a schedule of elections leading to constitutional government, INR, noting the absence of popular agitation for reforms at that time, judged that the program would be acceptable if carried out as promised. However, conflict within the military gave the Buddhists an opportunity to stage a showdown over the timing of reforms. Although this effort failed, INR felt that the situation still remained dangerous. Even when there was a high turnout for the Constituent Assembly, INR felt that there was little popular support for Ky. Over the next year, it became even more reserved over the value of military rule, noting the potentially explosive rivalry between Ky and General Thieu, the Chief of State, and the dangers of Ky's efforts to ensure his electoral victory. INR held that a civilian government that could gather genuine popular support would be preferable to continued military leadership, even at the risk of a degree of instability. In any event, it noted early in the contest for power that Thieu was probably stronger than Ky, and therefore advised that the US not back anyone in mid-1967. With Thieu's triumph and another good election turnout, INR noted that a modicum of order had returned to Saigon, again making the security situation the primary determinant of stability.

In the field of security, INR held that the situation had not improved during 1966-67, since the Communists retained the initiative and had kept their strength intact. The Allies could not register extensive gains, reduce the Communist capability for small-scale operations, destroy their political infrastructure, or diminish their hold in the countryside. The

strategic balance thus was not altered. Able to field a combat force nearly equal in numbers to that of the Allies, the Communists increased the over-all number of their attacks even if their large-scale actions diminished in frequency. INR concurred in a CIA judgment that ARVN was unable to cope with either the NVA or the guerrillas, or even to succeed in its new assignment to pacification.

The precepts of counterinsurgency, INR believed, remained the professed basis for action through all these years, but had rarely been applied in practice. INR did not accept MACV's concept of "two wars," and treated the security problem as a single entity. It noted, however, that the Allies were fighting--to their detriment--two disconnected styles of combat and, what was worse, were giving far greater priority to the conventional struggle than to the counterinsurgency campaign. INR also concluded that the major pacification campaign begun late in 1966 was self-defeating in its emphasis on rapid progress, especially since the rate projected for converting ARVN forces to this assignment was highly unrealistic.

The Tet offensive in 1968 was viewed by INR as an extension of past Communist strategy into the urban sector, primarily to create the conviction that the Communists could not lose the war and had to be accommodated. Later, INR noted that, in the wake of Tet, a security vacuum had been created in the countryside, resulting in a serious setback for pacification. The Communists, on balance, did not appear to have made the gains they had originally sought, but they had eroded the Allied position to a measurable extent and remained prepared for a more protracted effort.

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Throughout 1966, INR estimated that Hanoi would remain tough on negotiations, keeping the door open for an opportunity to deal on favorable terms but looking to protracted warfare to gain its ends. The Chinese took a still harder line, but INR believed that Hanoi was making its own decisions; it felt that North Vietnam favored Russian diplomatic efforts to the extent that they softened the US position.

Hanoi showed some sign of movement in January, 1967, when it ceased to demand as a condition for talks that the US recognize the Four Points. INR thought that Hanoi considered the Trinh interview to be a major step, since it implied that contact could follow if the US ended bombing and other acts of war against the North. As distinct from talks, however, a settlement was still conditional upon the Four Points and recognition of the NLF.

Thereafter, until the end of 1967, Hanoi's public stance remained on dead center, and INR observed that difficulties in the South, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and American pressure for mutual concessions at each stage presented serious problems for the North Vietnamese. INR judged during the year that Hanoi would not make a substantial move but that tentative private contacts could test the atmosphere and clarify specific issues. It recognized that the US ability to influence Hanoi was limited, and that Hanoi was suspicious of the US and had a strong military position in the South. Careful probing, however, plus a continuation of the military pattern of operations against the North could, INR estimated, bring forth evidences of flexibility.

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After the President's San Antonio speech, INR anticipated no concessions by Hanoi on reciprocity or on recognition of the NLF, and judged that North Vietnam would seek a spectacular military triumph before negotiating. Trinh's statement at year's end that there "will" be talks if the bombing ceased was considered a firm commitment so far as talking went, but INR added that the Communists, with their assets largely intact, had alternatives other than a negotiated settlement open to them.

At this time, INR began to develop possible scenarios for negotiating. It believed that Hanoi might use the issue of an agenda as a delaying tactic, would avoid discussions of a cease-fire or refer them to the NLF, and would press for recognition of the NLF, complete cessation of hostilities, and reparations. By March 1969, INR concluded that Hanoi had, over the preceding four months, backed away somewhat from its original position on all current issues with the exception of reciprocity.

Chinese reaction to the Vietnamese war, it had become evident by mid-summer of 1966, would probably not be as aggressive as INR had earlier assumed. The governing considerations included the Cultural Revolution, which had diverted Peking's attention from the Vietnamese conflict, as well as China's relatively cautious attitude in the face of more serious US bombing raids against Haiphong and Hanoi and near the Chinese border. INR judged that China would not openly intervene as long as there was no imminent threat that the US would invade North Vietnam or that the Hanoi regime would be destroyed. In April, 1967, however, in considering certain proposals for massive air attack that opened up the prospect of threatening the physical integrity of the regime, INR judged that this action would lead

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Hanoi to seek and China to provide whatever degree of assistance would be necessary to avert collapse. It believed, as before, that North Vietnam would take this step in full awareness of the increased influence Peking would gain, and that China would be willing to risk war with the US. As the war escalated during 1967, INR estimated that the Chinese might take specific action of relatively low risk to sustain Hanoi--for instance, permitting North Vietnamese aircraft to fly operations out of Chinese bases, or augmenting the Chinese military contingent in North Vietnam.

Sudden Democracy

The Honolulu meeting of February 1966 recognized the need to create an indigenous government in South Vietnam with sufficient support and stability to counteract nationalist dislike of US influence in national affairs and eventually to take over the US role both in the war and in future negotiations. INR reviewed the prospects for conducting the necessary elections and concluded that there was no intense pressure at the moment, although there still was a popular desire for elections. It therefore considered that the announced schedule was adequate to satisfy popular demands provided the government did not procrastinate. INR noted, however, that there were discrepancies between estimates of how much of the rural population would be able to participate in elections without undue Communist influence. MACV maintained that by November 1965 the areas which had been pacified held 52% of the rural population, but

1. See U-1: RFE-MM, "National Elections in South Vietnam," March 7, 1966

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Thieu and Ky estimated respectively that at the beginning of 1966 only 30% and 25% of the population were sufficiently free from Communist intimidation to hold elections.²

The timing of elections, however, was soon to become an issue in the last serious confrontation between the Buddhists and the GVN. When Ky attempted to dismiss I Corps Commander Gen. Thi on grounds of insubordination, Buddhist protest demonstrations flared in Hue and Danang. Originating as a protest against dismissal of one of the leaders of the unsuccessful attempt in 1960 at a coup against Diem, the movement quickly focused on the immediate restoration of civilian government. Although a compromise seemed possible in the beginning, INR believed that both sides were headed for a showdown and that this Buddhist protest formed the most serious threat to a government since the one that had ultimately toppled Diem. On the other hand, INR suggested, the unfortunate instability produced by the confrontation was partially balanced by the fact that without this channel of expression the Communists could probably better have exploited popular dissatisfaction.³ INR judged that once the contest moved from the streets to the polls, the Buddhists might attempt to boycott the elective process but would not in any case dominate the elections as an organized political force.

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2. See VI-2: RFE-MM, "US and GVN Statistics on Viet Cong Control Conflict," January 7, 1966
 3. See VI-3: IN-190, "Political Instability in South Vietnam: Some Positive Aspects," March 24, 1966

The US supported Ky's judgment that the electoral process could not be accelerated to meet Buddhist demands, and backed his decisions to remove Thi and to quell the disturbance by show of force. INR continued to judge the situation to be explosive, and regarded as premature and ominous Ky's view that the Buddhists had been defeated by his use of force. In fact, however, the combination of US support and Ky's pledge to hold elections deprived the Buddhists of both the issue and the following with which to continue the crisis.

In reviewing the prospects for elections for the national constituent assembly in September, 1966, INR concluded that the size of the vote remained the central issue rather than who won. Although there would probably be little response to the Buddhist boycott per se, combined Buddhist and Communist pressures might have produced a situation in which the easiest choice for the Vietnamese voter would be to abstain. In any case, it was difficult to see how the government could surpass the 73% turnout of voters in the relatively tranquil 1965 provincial elections unless it manipulated the vote.⁴ The following day proved a pleasant surprise to all concerned when 80.8% of the registered voters cast their ballots, without obvious government manipulation. However, INR did not interpret this surprisingly high turnout to imply popular support for the Ky government. Rather, the massive US presence had "insulated the government against the full consequences of its many and continued weaknesses"; and, although the political situation had clearly improved,

4. See VI-4: IN-561, "Prospects in the South Vietnamese Elections Uncertain," September 10, 1966

Ky's ability to remain in power (aside from the question of US support) "appears due more to the absence of any effective challenge" than to popular support.⁵

During the following year INR developed growing reservations over the general assumption that the continuation of either military government or Ky's leadership was necessary or beneficial to South Vietnam. Well before the presidential elections of September 1967, INR commented on the potential disaster which might result from an open contest for the presidency between Premier Ky and his rival, the Chief of State, General Thieu. INR suggested that for each contender to make a commitment to the Military Directorate that he would appoint the other Premier might prove the best way out of the dilemma of choosing one of them for President.⁶ Moreover, against the consensus of the US Government which placed Ky at the political center of gravity and held his election a certainty, INR maintained that Thieu's support among the military outweighed Ky's and that, in the absence of US support for Ky, Thieu would win a free election.⁷

In any case, INR argued, issues larger than relations between Ky and Thieu were at stake. Would it in fact be a disaster should the elections result in a civilian victory? How much would the gains in terms of

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5. See VI-5: REA-MM, "Assessment of the Current Situation in South Vietnam," October 7, 1966
 6. IN-178, "Will the Military Select Ky or Thieu as Candidate for President?" March 3, 1967
 7. NIE 53-66, "Problems of Political Development in South Vietnam," December 15, 1966

political development compensate for the losses in political stability?
And to what extent could the US lessen instability if it had to deal
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with a civilian government?

Finally, Ky's own actions in preparation for the elections appeared to present the greatest danger of all. INR considered it a minimum US political objective to preserve the credibility of the coming presidential elections. It then noted that Ky had already taken steps to ensure his victory, which he did primarily by using the secret police apparatus under General Loan as Diem had done the Can Lao; he was therefore well on the way to destroying the credibility--and thus the legitimacy--of the election. Should Ky continue, INR warned, US policies--whatever their present limitations--might suffer "a severe and possibly irretrievable set-back" and Ky might hand the Communists a "possibly decisive victory." ⁹ On June 30, 1967, Saigon announced a joint ticket, with Thieu running for President and Ky for Vice President.

The presidential elections of September 3 again produced an encouraging 81% turnout of voters, and the Thieu/Ky ticket won with 35% of the votes cast. In this period, INR believed the strikes against the North had been of more than marginal political value in the South; not only had they increased South Vietnamese political morale at a crucial point in

8. REA-MM-67-49, "Comments on CIA Study--The Vietnam Situation,"
January 2, 1967

9. See VI-6: memorandum for Mr. Katzenbach, June 24, 1967. In an oral presentation at that time, INR suggested that US interests might best be served by a neutral stance toward both Ky and Thieu.

the war, but they probably continued "to serve as an important factor
in maintaining South Vietnamese confidence." ¹⁰ Yet long-standing and
fundamental political weaknesses remained. At the turn of the year a
private study made for the Department had recommended that the GVN
attempt to resolve continuing problems of political instability and
popular alienation by decentralizing power, accommodating with local
groups, and encouraging these groups to form cohesive political entities.
INR found merit in the study, but believed that its proposal underesti-
mated the ability of local groups--other than the Viet Cong--to form
cohesive political entities. ¹¹

Furthermore, with an elected government installed, INR believed
that the primary determinant of political stability had again become--as
it had been originally under Diem--the security situation. This relation-
ship became particularly clear in the crisis of the Tet offensive in 1968. ¹²
In fact, though the regime survived intact with no important defections,
political fragmentation remained and the government had yet to win popular
confidence. Thus, when the GVN arrested opposition leaders during the
Tet offensive with the announcement that it was taking them into

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10. See VI-14: REA-MM, "Comments on CIA Study--the Vietnam Situation,"
June 1, 1967 SECRET
 11. See VI-7: REA-MM, "Huntington's Report on South Vietnam,"
January 18, 1968
 12. IN-101, "The GVN in the Wake of the Communist Urban Offensive,"
February 5, 1968

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"protective custody" against the VC, INR warned that if this custody turned out to be a pretext for something more the results could be serious.

The War Revisited

INR had not accepted the validity of MACV's "two war" concept in 1965, nor did it now reshape its analysis to accord with the operational distinction between the military effort and the massive new para-military effort known as "the other war." Instead, INR continued to focus on the overall security situation in which both efforts played important and complementary parts.

In reviewing the security situation during this period, INR estimated that the war was likely to continue along the same general lines. Despite the massive US military buildup and economic assistance, no significant gains could be seen; despite heavy losses, the Communists retained a substantial military capability. Much of INR's work consisted like this of cautionary comments on evaluations by others that stressed allied progress and Communist setbacks. In addition, after mid-1966, INR joined CIA in questioning MACV's (and DIA's) estimates of Communist force strength and, particularly, of the numbers of NVA troops in the South. INR and CIA believed that MACV's methodology was too restrictive and resulted in a much lower estimate of Communist strength than was warranted by full use of all relevant intelligence.

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13. IN-151, "South Vietnamese Oppositionists Placed Under 'Protective Custody,'" February 21, 1968
 14. See Special Annex I for a detailed discussion.

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Similarly, INR questioned the views of US military elements when they repeatedly stressed the importance of Communist use of Cambodian territory. INR continued to argue that this territory was of relatively little importance to the overall Communist effort, and that the highest levels of the Government of Cambodia did not collude in the Communists' use of it. In September 1967, INR objected strongly to a sentence added to an already agreed USIB paper, to the effect that the role of Cambodian territory in Communist operations "could have an important effect on the outcome of the war." In fact, INR pointed out, this sentence flew in the face of all past formal intelligence assessments, including those of DIA.¹⁵

A. Capabilities and Strategies

During the summer and fall of 1966, a consultant's assessment of VC/GVN capabilities, based on interrogations and captured Communist documents, revealed that the VC was experiencing morale problems, and some observers asked why the Communists gave no sign of responding to peace proposals at that time. INR pointed out that the US intervention had no doubt caused problems sufficient to impair Communist morale, but that the captured documents and other evidences belied the contention that these problems had "significantly weakened" Viet Cong capabilities.¹⁶

15. See VI-12: REA-MM-66-32, "Cambodia Paper," May 7, 1966 TOP SECRET; see also USIB-M-468, September 12, 1967

16. See VI-8: RFE-MM-66-48, "Leon Goure's Briefing Notes on the Viet Cong," August 6, 1966

INR later in the fall pointed to the "apparent Communist confidence that domestic and international pressures will make it impossible for the US to stay the course," and the Communists' belief that they had solid ground for their hopes. The Communists had shown that they could increase the form of activity that had so far been essential to their success, which was harassing actions by small units, and they had maintained their political infrastructure intact, whereas the GVN had been unable to extend its control in rural areas despite its increased effort. Further, while the allied armies had overall superiority in numbers, the Communists were fielding a force almost equal in manpower to the number of allied troops actually committed to combat. INR judged that the Communists might miscalculate regarding US resolve, but "they may well be closer to the mark...in their belief that they can maintain much of their position in the countryside and that--as the war presses increasingly heavily on an urban population thus far relatively immune to their political influence--they can make political inroads in the cities to the point where the impact of the US presence as well as the level of conflict will become intolerable to the people of South Vietnam."¹⁷

By the end of 1966, MACV's statistics revealed a decrease in large-scale Communist attacks. In early January 1967, a CIA study of these statistics concluded that the Viet Cong were returning to guerrilla warfare and thus, as they came face to face with the burgeoning US/GVN

17. See VI-9: REA-41, "The Vietnam War: Situation and Prospects," October 11, 1966

pacification effort, would lose even more ground in the rural areas in 1967 than in the previous year. INR's position since 1964 had been that the Viet Cong had not departed substantially from the strategy of guerrilla warfare and were not likely to do so; it now rejoined that the overall number of Communist attacks had grown even though large-scale attacks had decreased. Therefore, it was premature to conclude that the Viet Cong were becoming more vulnerable in rural areas. On the contrary, INR pointed out, the Communists appeared to be getting ready to re-emphasize small-scale effort at the village level, just where the US and the GVN were preparing to operate. Should the pacification program be implemented properly, the war would then be joined for the first time at precisely the level where the Communists held the advantage. On the other hand, the proposed introduction of US forces into the heavily populated Mekong Delta would constitute a new operational concept which would, at best, involve an initial period of uncertainty and under any conditions¹⁸ "could precipitate serious adverse political and economic repercussions."

On GVN military capabilities, INR agreed with an earlier CIA study which concluded the ARVN was "wholly incapable of prolonged effective resistance against North Vietnamese Army units in South Vietnam." Furthermore, INR pointed out, traditional deficiencies continued to plague the ARVN; it still refused to adopt the small-unit tactics necessary to deal effectively with the Viet Cong guerrillas, and appeared unlikely to make

18. See VI-10: REA-MM-67-5, "Comments on the CIA Paper, 'The War in Vietnam,'" January 13, 1967. Also discussed in REA-MM-66-92, "Enemy-Initiated Attacks in South Vietnam in 1966," December 2, 1966.

the effort even under the new pacification program. In particular, INR believed, "Ky's statement that ARVN's conversion to pacification can be completed within six months, we feel, is clearly wide of the mark."

Thus, unless the US took massive assistance measures, the consequence of ARVN deficiencies would become even more serious in the pacification operations scheduled to begin in the near future.

B. Pacification Reviewed

Upon the launching late in 1966, after nearly a year's preparation, of the new combined military-pacification program, INR undertook an analysis in depth of past efforts. It concluded: "Basic precepts behind the counterinsurgency doctrine have survived in principle but have been little applied in practice. As program has succeeded program, not only have the principal deficiencies in implementation become increasingly clear, but it has also become evident that these deficiencies have been essentially the same ones from the outset." Specifically, few Vietnamese had ever understood or effectively supported the goals of pacification; the ARVN had never escaped from its mold of conventional warfare; and US leadership in Vietnam had done little to reorient the effort. Thus, despite increasing US support, the GVN continued to be relatively ineffective in meeting the first essential of pacification--to give the peasants confidence in the GVN's ability to maintain security.

19. See VI-11: REA-MM, "Comments on CIA Study of the South Vietnamese Army," December 19, 1966 SECRET/EXDIS

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The review pointed out that an additional problem had emerged after the development of MACV's "two war" concept and the US decision to join the war in 1965. Since then the two types of engagement had occurred simultaneously but had not been mutually supporting; US forces, for example, in northern South Vietnam had inflicted heavy casualties, but there had been relatively little follow-up to consolidate these victories through pacification, so that the Communists were able both to replace their losses and regain their positions in the countryside. In fact, both US and ARVN forces remained oriented toward conventional operations and, official claims notwithstanding, the figures showed that the conventional war continued to have priority over counterinsurgency. The major increase in saturation bombing, artillery, and air strikes compared with the relatively modest increase in pacification efforts testified to this priority. Finally, INR argued, an increase of almost 500,000 Vietnamese under GVN control was not an indication of progress in pacification; rather it reflected the movement of refugees into the relatively secure urban areas and was due "more to the intensity and the destructiveness of the fighting than to any shift in the allegiance of the peasant." An indication of the difficulties involved could be found in Long An, the province in which the greatest pacification effort had been conducted; it showed a net gain of only about 5% in the number of persons brought under government control since 1964.

Immediate prospects, the review judged, for the forthcoming pacification effort did not seem bright. Since many ARVN commanders regarded

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their forces as a source of local and national political power, the personal interests of local Vietnamese commanders would tend to override needs of the pacification effort. In any case, there had been no appreciable improvement in the ARVN's poor leadership and morale, its poor relations with the population, and the low operational capabilities which had plagued it in the past. Similarly, there had been no change in the handling of para-military forces, a key element in the fundamental concept of pacification, which had been consistently ignored or misused from the outset; indeed, in preparation for the coming offensive, "the GVN has already taken actions which could increase still further ARVN control over the paramilitary."

Moreover, INR was not certain that if MACV applied its "two war" concept in the heavily populated Delta, it could avoid the risk of political repercussions from the direct contact of large numbers of foreign troops with the civilian population. There was a good chance that US forces would eventually participate directly in village pacification, either--as had the Marines previously at Danang--in order to protect US base facilities, or "simply on the grounds that the Vietnamese are not doing the job efficiently."

Finally, INR warned, "We cannot expect quick results. If we do so and hence fail to accept the necessity for unremitting, determined, long-term action, in which pacification is given closest attention and highest

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priority, we will run the risk of repeating on a larger scale the costly mistakes of the past."²⁰

C. Prospects

During the first six months of 1967, the Intelligence Community-- including Defense members--agreed that the series of generally optimistic assessments from Vietnam could not be supported by the evidence available in Washington. INR added that current indices used to judge progress were inappropriate. Since the Communist objective was still less to destroy US or GVN forces than to undermine South Vietnamese and US will to continue, the ability of larger allied efforts to curtail Communist large-scale operations and even to enable US/GVN forces to enter Communist-controlled areas did not by itself constitute evidence of significant progress. The US was proving that the Communists could not win a military victory, but it still had not shown that they could be defeated militarily. In general, the Communists were not relying heavily upon military victory, and statistics showing improvement in allied conventional military operations were therefore irrelevant to the central problem.

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20. See VI-13: REA-MM, "Strategic Concept for Vietnam: An Analysis," January 6, 1967. SECRET/EXDIS. Two days later, Operation Cedar Falls began, and Ambassador Lodge predicted that such "sensational" military gains would be made during 1967 that open peace negotiations would probably never take place.
21. See VI-14: REA-MM-67-49, "Comments on CIA Study--The Vietnam Situation," June 1, 1967. SECRET

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Instead, after the new series of offensives had been under way for six months, INR maintained, as it had done so often before, that "the strategic balance has not altered decisively." The Communists retained considerable military initiative--witness the extent to which "battlefield contact remains a matter of Communist initiative even in operations mounted by allied forces." On balance, INR concluded, "there has been no significant progress in the implementation of the pacification program.

In the face of these reservations of the Intelligence Community regarding the ground war, reports from the US Mission and public statements by the US Government continued to express a guarded optimism through the summer and fall of 1967. US operations continued at a high level and captured documents continued to suggest mounting morale problems among the Communists. In September, INR recognized that Viet Cong morale problems were becoming more severe, but it felt that, while these problems might make the prospect of negotiations more attractive to Hanoi, they had yet to impair Communist military capabilities. These views did not convert Embassy Saigon; by January 1968 the Mission had, indeed, come to agree that the flight of refugees to the urban areas had been responsible for the statistical increase in the proportion of population under GVN control, but it still maintained that pacification had now developed

22. See VI-15: IN-543, "The Situation in South Vietnam - A Capsule Assessment," June 29, 1967, SECRET.

23. REA-MM-67-16/10, "Viet Cong Morale and Attitudes," September 2, 1967, TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE

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into a process of attrition in which Communist strength was steadily declining.

The Tet Offensive

INR had periodically pointed out Communist efforts over the past few years to focus on the hitherto relatively unaffected but politically volatile urban population. It had estimated that the US political base in Vietnam could be destroyed should the Communists succeed in making the war intolerable for the urban population. Now, on the eve of the Tet offensive, INR pointed out that selected Communist large-scale attacks and an unprecedented level of small-scale attacks "have drawn US forces from core population areas," leaving them and the pacification program open to increased Viet Cong pressures. ²⁴ Nothing, however, in the available evidence or in the past "logic" of the situation led INR to anticipate the scope or nature of the Tet offensive.

As this offensive unfolded, INR interpreted the urban attacks not as a substitute or a change in Communist strategy, but essentially an extension of past strategy into urban areas. ²⁵ The objective was not so much to win mass support as to create the conviction that the Communists ²⁶ could not be defeated and thus must be accommodated. By the end of February, INR concluded that, because the GVN rushed its forces from the

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24. IN-61, "The Situation in North Vietnam at the Turn of the Year," January 19, 1968, CONFIDENTIAL
 25. IN-84, "The Urban Attacks in Vietnam: Implications for Strategy," January 31, 1968, SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM
 26. IN-101, "The GVN in the Wake of the Communist Urban Offensive," February 3, 1968, SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

countryside to protect the urban centers, the Tet offensive had the reactive effect of creating a vacuum in the rural areas, which had made
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 "pacification virtually inoperative." The Communists were "well embarked upon carefully planned mutually supporting military-political efforts directed toward a massive deterioration in the GVN position and an erosion of the political basis for a US presence in South Vietnam." Whether or not they would be able to consolidate the quick political-military gains in both rural and urban areas as they appeared to hope, and "regardless of developments during the next few months," the Commun-
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 ists would "prepare a protracted effort."

Probing for Peace

As it resumed bombing of the North that intensified combat in the South early in 1966, the US remained publicly committed to the search for a negotiated settlement. But INR could see no chance of agreement during 1966 on US terms. Hanoi appeared to be determined to pursue its objectives in the South and to stand by its own requirements for a settlement.

When Hanoi's Foreign Ministry on February 3, 1966, issued a Memorandum which "exposed" the "sham" of the US bombing pause, INR interpreted the statement to reflect concern that the US international position had

27. See VI-16: IN-161, "The Countryside in the Wake of the VC Urban Offensive," February 29, 1968, SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

28. See VI-17: IN-172, "Vietnam: Communist Strategy in Retrospect and Prospect," March 2, 1968, SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

improved and that Hanoi's own image had suffered from its intransigence
29 during the pause. Even so, Hanoi showed no sign of compromise nor of
30 interest in a reconvening of the Geneva Conference. INR pointed out
that, although Hanoi had not at this time specifically excluded anyone
from participation in a future government of South Vietnam, it probably
felt that its side had already won the right for the NLF to play a major
31 role.

A. On Original Terms

Through the rest of 1966, INR thought that Hanoi was maintaining a
tough if slightly vague stand on negotiations. It kept the door open to
talks on terms favorable to itself and made no attempt to create further
conditions, but at the same time gave the impression that it expected
a protracted conflict and believed that the time was not ripe for negoti-
32 ations. In September, INR took issue with a CIA speculation that Hanoi
would be forced to reconsider its policy by the following spring, and
wrote: "At this juncture there is no evidence that Hanoi's leaders have
lost faith in protracted warfare....In any event...it does not seem likely

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29. IN-71, "Hanoi Defends Refusal to Respond to US Peace Overtures,"
February 5, 1966, CONFIDENTIAL
 30. IN-85, "Hanoi's Position on a Geneva Conference," February 10, 1966,
CONFIDENTIAL
 31. REA-MM-66-13, "Vietnamese Communist Attitudes toward Coalition Govern-
ment in South Vietnam," February 25, 1966, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
 32. IN-267, "Recent NV Statements on Negotiations Reflect No Change,"
April 29, 1966, CONFIDENTIAL

that in less than a year from now the Vietnamese Communists will have decided that they have been wrong." ³³ Both Hanoi and Peking appeared

to be making considerable efforts to ward off the periodic peace initiatives of U Thant and others. ³⁴ INR continued to note that Peking's

position on negotiations was consistently harder than that of Hanoi, demanding as prior conditions that the US withdraw and recognize the

NLF, but it believed that Hanoi was making its own decisions; Hanoi's need to retain the firm support of China was "an important but not yet ³⁵ compelling factor."

For its part, China might feel impelled to enter the war in the event a US invasion or a collapse of the DRV appeared imminent, but its efforts to head off negotiations would be limited to diplomatic pressure. Peking would probably accept a cessation of hostilities as an "inevitable pause" and hope to see the conflict resumed when ³⁶ and where possible.

The rash of probes which broke out from the Soviets and East Europeans during the latter part of 1966 appeared to INR to be motivated by their own immediate interests. For the East Europeans, the threat of further

33. See VI-18: REA-MM, "Comments on CIA All-source Study on Communist Capabilities in South Vietnam," September 16, 1966, S/NF/LD

34. IN-639, "Hanoi and Peking Field Peace Proposals," October 14, 1966, CONFIDENTIAL

35. REA-MM-66-49, "North Vietnam: Peking's Independent Partner or Pawn," August 9, 1966, S/NF/LD

36. See VI-19: REA-55, "Would Peiping Thwart a Negotiations Bid from Hanoi?" November 28, 1966

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escalation in Vietnam portended further pressure toward "re-unification" within the Soviet bloc. Moscow did not consider that the threat of escalation was sufficient to jeopardize its interests in Asia, but was attempting, rather, to present Hanoi with some US concession to show that it could do more for Hanoi than could China. Therefore, while it pressed the US for concessions, the Soviet Union would not attempt to pressure the North Vietnamese toward negotiations. In any case, INR believed, Moscow had no authority from Hanoi to make the concessions it was hinting at. INR pointed out that North Vietnam neither denied nor sanctioned these maneuvers; no doubt some elements in Hanoi welcomed these efforts to soften the US while others feared these moves could get out of hand and might lead the US to conclude that Hanoi's determination was weakening.

B. Hanoi Budgets

Until now, there had been ambiguity in Hanoi's position on preconditions for talks. There was the clear demand for an unconditional bombing halt, but Hanoi also insisted on some unspecified form of prior US "recognition" or "acceptance" of the Four Points which Hanoi termed the basis for a settlement.

However, Harrison Salisbury's account of his interview in Hanoi with Pham Van Dong on January 4, 1967 (carried in the New York Times of that date), revealed a significant shift in Hanoi's position. In an interview

37. See VI-20: REA-58, "Hanoi Silent on East European and Soviet Negotiation Probes," December 9, 1966; also, RSB-111, "Recent Soviet and East European Approaches to US on Vietnam," November 2, 1966

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unusually free of invective, Pham Van Dong said that Hanoi's Four Points were not to be considered "conditions" for talks. INR believed that this remark was a major clarification of Hanoi's heretofore ambiguous position and was probably an effort at least to appear more reasonable. 38
On January 6 a version of the interview from Hanoi confirmed that recognition of the Four Points was a basis for settlement, but not for talks. At the same time in Paris, Mai Van Bo stated publicly that Hanoi "would" examine proposals for contacts if the US stopped the bombing.

On January 28, 1967, in a major policy statement that was to serve as a benchmark in the slow progression toward talks, Foreign Minister Trinh, in an interview with Wilfred Burchett, declared that there "could" be talks if the US "unconditionally" halted the bombing and "other acts of war" against the North. INR judged that Hanoi did not use Bo's more positive formula for fear of appearing to be willing to negotiate the future of the Viet Cong merely in return for a respite from bombing in the North. 39
As INR saw Hanoi's new position, it connected contacts--including negotiations--to a cessation of the bombing and "other acts of war," and linked a settlement to US willingness to recognize and deal with the NLF.

Hanoi's motives for this clarification could have been to encourage a bombing halt during the upcoming 1967 Tet holidays. However, INR noted,

38. See VI-21: IN-3, "Pham Van Dong...", January 5, 1967, CONFIDENTIAL

39. IN-8, "New Salisbury Text...Much the Same as Original Report," January 9, 1967, S/NF

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Hanoi also had its eyes on the South and might hope to initiate talks before a constitution could be drafted and elections held. Yet it ran the risk, if confronted at each step with US insistence on mutual concessions, that the momentum now generated by this flexibility might later compel Hanoi to make compromises it did not now wish to make. Additional dangers would arise if the Communist position in the South deteriorated and if there were further turmoil in China. On the other hand, should talks begin, Hanoi might attempt to force the US into negotiations with the NLF by refusing to discuss matters concerning the South. Thus, INR judged Hanoi's maximum bargaining position to be one of holding out the hope of contacts in return for a bombing halt, and committing the US to discuss the future of the GVN before contacts would develop into negotiations, thereby assuring a role for the NLF. However, INR estimated that Hanoi would be prepared to give ground later.

When the US initiated a bombing pause on February 8, 1967, it was not yet prepared to grant a bombing halt in return for contacts unless there were a reciprocal halt in supplying the Viet Cong. There was a seeming diminution in the infiltration of NVA forces, though INR believed that it reflected the fulfillment of Communist force levels rather than

40. See VI-22: IN-87, "Hanoi's Current Position on Negotiations and Settlement," February 3, 1967, S/LD

41. See VI-23: REA-MM-67-16, "Attached Report from the British," February 7, 1967, SECRET; see also IN-95, "Hanoi Maintains Trinh Position, Says Next Move Up to US," February 7, 1967, SECRET

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a desire to negotiate; in any case, the Department expressed its "serious concern" over the increased Communist buildup of supplies which the Communists initiated during the pause, and on February 14 the US resumed the bombing.

C. A Summer of Stalemate

There followed a moratorium on official North Vietnamese public initiatives for nearly a year. However, INR did not believe that the resumption of bombing had basically altered Hanoi's interest in a negotiated settlement--only the manner in which it would operate. Thus, in spite of Hanoi's silence immediately following the resumption, INR believed it would remain under pressure to change its own position before military--and even more political--developments in the South went beyond the point at which Hanoi could alter them through negotiations. INR believed that Hanoi's effort to put the onus for continuation of the war back on the US through its release of the exchange of letters between Ho and President Johnson had been motivated by concern over the political-military situation in the South as well as by fears of further escalation in the wake of the March Conference at Guam. Hanoi's public position,

42. See REA-MM, "Comments on USIB Memo on Communist Infiltration," February 8, 1967, S/NF/

43. IN-220, "Hanoi on Negotiations and Settlement; Relative Silence," March 17, 1967, S/LD

44. IN-231, "Why Did Hanoi Release the Johnson-Ho Correspondence?" March 22, 1967, CONF.

however, remained on dead center, as was typically illustrated by Foreign Minister Trinh's article in Hoc Tap of mid-April which appeared designed to answer criticism on the one hand from the Chinese that negotiations should be avoided per se, and on the other, from western and neutral sources, that Hanoi should be more flexible in its pursuit of peace.

Hanoi's position remained unchanged throughout the summer of 1967, although both sides received numerous ambiguous approaches in private through third parties. In mid-June, INR believed that the leaders in Hanoi had decided against any substantial move toward approaching a settlement through negotiation, but that the US might find some interest among them in a mutual testing of the atmosphere for discussing whether it would be possible to embark on negotiations while begging all questions about conclusions or settlement. There might be, thus, "a slight chance" for contacts for this purpose provided we did not treat them as negotiations while the bombing continued. There were also some points the US might seek to clarify: for example, Hanoi had recently omitted its demand for a "permanent" halt in the bombing, and Ho, in his letter to President Johnson, had omitted reference to "reunification" or to the NLF program, both of which had been important elements of the Four Points.

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45. IN-354, "DRV Foreign Minister Explains Hanoi's Negotiation Stand to Party," May 5, 1967, Limited Official Use
46. See VI-24: REA-MM-67-52, "Study on Prospects for Vietnam Negotiations," June 14, 1967, TOP SECRET/EXDIS; see also INR memoranda of June 7 and 14 to the Secretary.

Again in July, INR detected changes in some details of Hanoi's position and suggested that the US might encourage Hanoi's interest in negotiations more through private and discreet probing than through further public statements. ⁴⁷ Hanoi still appeared adamantly negative toward reciprocity, but there was reason to believe that it was leaning toward reopening some of the doors to talks which had been closed since earlier in the year. "Accordingly, the logic of the situation would argue very strongly for no drastic shifts in our present pattern of operations against the North" which might persuade Hanoi against this ⁴⁸ move. To be sure, the Chinese would be prepared to bring considerable pressure to bear on Hanoi to prevent any greater flexibility. Hanoi would be prepared to resist, but this threat would, INR felt, influence Hanoi's thinking, and would probably block a positive decision in the absence of more support than the moderate DRV leadership then appeared ⁴⁹ able to muster.

In a more detailed review, INR saw Hanoi's basic attitude toward negotiations as one of suspicion based on past disappointments, distrust of US sincerity, and concern over its ability to achieve its goals through

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47. See VI-25: REA-MM-67-61, "Prospective North Vietnamese Position and Tactics on Negotiations and Settlement," July 7, 1967, SECRET/EXDIS
48. See VI-26: REA-MM-67-69, "Comment on Your Memorandum of July 17 to the Secretary on General and Diplomatic Factors Affecting the Bombing Policy," July 18, 1967, SECRET/EXDIS
49. See VI-27: REA-MM-67-77, "Hanoi's Sensitivity to Peking's Pressure; the Possibilities and the Record," August 2, 1967, SECRET/LD

a negotiated settlement. To this fundamental skepticism was added Hanoi's persistent confidence in its political and military strength in the South, and Peking's pressures against concession. Nevertheless, it now appeared that Hanoi had regarded the Dong-Trinh statements of January 1967 as "a substantial departure and concession," and subsequent moves "at least suggest the possibility that some greater flexibility may be entering into North Vietnamese thinking on this subject." Moreover, other factors might now be moving Hanoi toward greater flexibility over negotiations: accumulated losses in material and morale from past bombing, fears of a future expansion of bombing, particularly if it extended to the dikes, and concern over deterioration of their "reliable rear" in China. The ability of the US, in this context, to influence Hanoi's attitude remained extremely limited. A public statement clarifying US "terms" for a halt in the bombing "would almost undoubtedly generate a strongly negative initial reaction from Hanoi,...[but] if there are officials in Hanoi who advocate negotiations that might lead to substantial compromise, their hand might be strengthened over the long run, particularly if we remain consistent."⁵⁰

This assessment gained some support from a report of conversations between the North Vietnamese and Norwegian Ambassadors to Peking. These exchanges seemed to indicate that Hanoi was interested in some form of reciprocity other than a public agreement to reduce Communist forces in

50. See VI-28: REA-MM-67-84, "Hanoi and Negotiations: An Interim Appraisal," August 16, 1967, SECRET/EXDIS

the South. INR suggested this opening offered the "slight possibility" that Hanoi might not object to some other form of reciprocity such as a cease-fire "or possibly no increment in the rate of supply." Again, however, the situation still argued against any alteration of the US operations against the North, since a reduction of pressure during these contacts would reveal moves toward negotiations--especially to the Chinese--and an intensification of pressure might lead Hanoi to conclude that the US was not serious.

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In any event, INR judged that US domestic politics and the prospects for US elections were secondary in Hanoi's thinking; Hanoi would not be moved more rapidly toward negotiations by hopes of avoiding a possibly more "hawkish" Republican administration.

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D. From "Reciprocity" to "No Advantage"

In his San Antonio speech of September 29, President Johnson announced a major concession in US requirements for a bombing halt: instead of ending support for the war in the South, the Communists could now indicate that productive talks would ensue; as for reciprocity in kind, the US would now "assume" that Hanoi "would not take advantage" of the pause.

The speech produced no immediate positive response, and Hanoi retained its hard public line without directly rejecting the new formula. INR

51. See VI-29: REA-MM-67-87, "The Loan-Algard Dialogue," August 26, 1967, SECRET/EXDIS

52. See VI-30: REA-MM-67-98, "Vietnam and Domestic US Politics," September 21, 1967, SECRET

believed that Hanoi was not yet ready to alter its position on reciprocity and recognition of the NLF, and thus "would probably not engage in meaningful negotiations if an early halt occurred." However, renewed probes from Hanoi were likely--especially as the possibility of another Tet bombing pause approached--and the US response and clarification to these probes could provide "a crucial element in Hanoi's decision process."⁵³

INR also speculated that "North Vietnamese theory calls for some military spectacles before negotiating and Hanoi...thus would want to be certain that the US did not act on its 'assumption' offer until the Communists had had time to prepare the way militarily in South Vietnam. At that point Hanoi may want to pick up the 'assumption' offer, and therefore has refrained from explicitly condemning it in its public media while rejecting it indirectly" through unofficial channels.⁵⁴ Although evidence was lacking, INR speculated that Hanoi would wait for the 1967-68 Christmas-Tet period when it would expect a bombing halt which it might hope to extend by some shifts in position short of specifically accepting the San Antonio formula. INR felt that Hanoi might step up military pressures in advance of such moves or while making them. But for the moment, anyway, Hanoi did not appear prepared for "productive discussions."⁵⁵

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53. See VI-31: REA-MM-67-106, "Appraisal of Hanoi's Current Approach on Negotiations, and Prospects for Timing of Future Actions," October 13, 1967, SECRET/EXDIS
54. See VI-32: IN-842, "Burchett Dispatch," October 23, 1967
55. See REA-MM, November 17, 1967

INR continued to hold that Hanoi did not count heavily on the 1968 elections in the US to bring about changes in US policy toward Vietnam. Hanoi would indeed attempt to exploit domestic US opinion, but would not base its own strategy and tactics on the expectation that the election would lead to changes in American policy. ⁵⁶

E. Hanoi "Will" Talk

After a long series of hints, made in private but denied in public, that Hanoi "would negotiate" without an "unconditional" or "permanent" pause, Foreign Minister Trinh on December 29, 1967, stated that Hanoi "will" hold talks on "questions concerned" after an "unconditional" halt. This phrasing clearly contrasted with his statement of January 28 that talks "could" be held.

Recalling its forecast that there would be some such shift in the pre-Tet period, INR noted that Hanoi's motives were still unclear: on the one hand, Hanoi might be seeking a bombing halt without progress toward a settlement; on the other hand, it might genuinely believe that the new Trinh statement constituted an adequate response to the San Antonio formula. INR concluded: "On balance, we believe Hanoi views the new Trinh formula as an important step toward the US position, but we are not certain whether Hanoi really expects us to believe that the formula meets our vital needs, or whether it hopes that we can be pushed into a bombing halt and talks on its terms through a minimal concession." ⁵⁷

56. See VI-33: IN-951, "Hanoi Views the US Elections," November 20, 1967

57. See VI-34: REA-MM, "Trinh Alters January 28 Formula," January 3, 1968, SECRET/EXDIS

In a general appraisal of North Vietnam's position, INR concluded that Hanoi--motivated both by the effects of the bombing and concern that political developments in the South would generate effective competition to the NLF--had now "seriously accepted the prospect of holding talks." However, Hanoi's assets in the South and control of the North remained largely intact, and to negotiate a settlement was by no means Hanoi's only alternative. Thus, whereas Hanoi was clearly committed to "talks," and possibly to "promptness," INR did not believe Hanoi was yet prepared for the "productive" discussions required by the San Antonio formula--especially if this concept necessarily included talks about the future of the South. Nor did it seem ready for "genuine compromise." INR suggested that the US might inform Hanoi privately of the problems remaining after the Trinh statement. Although Hanoi might conclude that the US viewed the Trinh statement as a sign of weakness and thus might resist further concession, INR held that, if such probes were not undertaken, Hanoi would calculate that the US would be compelled to initiate a Tet pause without further concession on its part.

Respecting the demand that the US cease "all other acts of war," INR estimated that Hanoi would object to continued reconnaissance but would not allow it--unless publicized--to prevent talks. As for the Chinese, INR suggested that Peking had not responded publicly to the

58. See VI-35: REA-MM, "North Vietnamese Perspectives on the War and Negotiations," January 6, 1968, SECRET/EXDIS

59. REA-MM-68-14, January 18, 1968

Trinh statement because its displeasure over the prospect for talks was superseded by its concern lest it be left out on a limb. ⁶⁰ Peking made its opposition evident without saying so explicitly in public but would gradually adjust its position so as to avoid the appearance of criticizing what Hanoi actually had agreed to do.

Finally, INR attempted to sketch a scenario of how an opening round of talks might go. Since the "no advantage" formula struck directly at Hanoi's intention to fight while talking, INR concluded that the North Vietnamese would remain unwilling to concede on that issue now or in the near future. If and when Hanoi did wish to resolve the issue "it may be done only through some tacit understanding never formally acknowledged by Hanoi." Once the bombing stopped, INR continued, Hanoi would have achieved its immediate objective and would feel no urgent pressure for progress in the talks. For the next month or two, it would "probably take a very hard negotiations stand."

Hanoi would be likely to demand agreement on an agenda before any discussions of substance, and the version it preferred would fundamentally conflict with US interests. Most notably, Hanoi would hope to keep the question of a ceasefire from arising before questions of a political settlement had been discussed. An agenda might be agreed, however, as a result of Hanoi's fear of resumed bombing and combined with tacit recognition by both parties that they had in effect reserved their positions. Among the points of substance Hanoi would raise, would be US

60. See IN-9, "Chinese Silent and Probably Unhappy over Trinh 'Will Talk' Statement," January 4, 1968, S/NFD/LD

recognition of Vietnamese sovereignty and Hanoi's Four Points, a US withdrawal and cessation of reconnaissance flights, a US declaration of a "permanent" bombing halt, and "reparations" for damages. In response to US initiatives, Hanoi would attempt to counter a cease-fire proposal by referring the matter to the NLF, and could be expected to react negatively to the questions of a withdrawal or pullback from the DMZ. Hanoi might prove more forthcoming on the question of an exchange of prisoners.

As talks progressed, INR estimated, the elements which would influence Hanoi toward accommodation would be the fear of resumed bombing, the hope of gaining concessions and of influencing US domestic opinion, international pressure, and US pressure in the South. Hanoi's position would tend to be hardened by Chinese influence, by concern over the effects on the NLF of any compromise, and by its hopes to use the discussions as a tactical supplement to military and political activities in the South.

The following month, INR again reviewed the bidding and found that Hanoi had modified its position since Trinh's statement of December 29⁶¹ on all essential questions save that of reciprocity, and INR could not anticipate that Hanoi would shift at all on this issue "in the near

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61. See VI-36: REA-MM-68-22, "Hanoi's Position in the Opening Round of Talks, and Elements Affecting the Further Evolution of that Position," January 26, 1968 SECRET/EXDIS
62. See VI-37: REA-MM, "Hanoi Diplomat in Paris Hints at Hanoi's Readiness to Cut Back 'Aid' to Viet Cong," February 20, 1968, SECRET/EXDIS

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future." In this context, President Johnson announced the "partial" cessation of the US bombing of Vietnam on March 31, 1968.

The Chinese Role

From the resumption of bombing in February 1966 until mid-summer, INR continued to document evidence of Chinese Communist preparations for the possible expansion of the Vietnam conflict into a general war between China and the US. In April, INR reported on the expansion and improvement of the net of airfields bordering North Vietnam, as well as priority work on rail and road systems in South and Southeast China. It noted scattered reports of evacuation from urban areas and of relocation of some factories and government institutions, as well as indications that civil defense programs were being implemented, albeit without "desperate urgency." INR judged that Peking's preparedness efforts in recent months "have proceeded amidst an atmosphere of crisis and tension." 64

The following month the Chinese increased their air activity along the border, after a hiatus of three months, at the same time that they published an interview in which Chou En-lai specifically raised the possibility that war would grow out of Chinese aid to North Vietnam. INR suggested that this statement reflected increased Chinese concern, particularly as US bombing missions struck closer to China, and possibly

63. See VI-38: REA-MM, "Summary of Hanoi Statements on Negotiations Issues Since the Dec. 29, 1967 Statement by Foreign Minister Trinh," March 1968

64. See VI-39: RM, REA-19, "Peking Continues to Key: Its Political, Military Activities to the Danger of War," April 27, 1966

indicated Peking's intent to increase its assistance to Hanoi. Shortly thereafter, on May 12, Peking reported the loss of a Chinese fighter to US aircraft over China. Despite denials from the Pentagon, INR believed that the evidence confirmed Peking's claim that the incident took place over China. In any event, China did not exploit the incident to appreciably heighten tension.

As INR learned by mid-summer, the Chinese leadership in the late spring of 1966 was going through the crisis that erupted publicly in June with the launching of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. There is now little question that the movement diverted China's attention from the Vietnamese conflict. Initially, however, after US strikes against the Hanoi-Haiphong area and Ho Chi Minh's appeal in July for more aid, Peking responded with massive propaganda demonstra-
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tions. But INR did not believe that the statements made any more explicit or immediate Peking's "vague threats" of more active intervention. It joined in a SNIE which predicted that Peking would send in more logistical units and "may" even move some infantry units into North Vietnam, but held that, "at present levels of US action," China "will not commit its ground forces to the war, nor its air force to deliberate
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and sustained action against US forces."

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65. On July 22, 1966, a rally and statement by Liu Shao-chi kicked off the effort. Liu's declaration, one of the strongest official reaffirmations of readiness to assist Hanoi, was his last public act and was made while he was in deep trouble with Mao.
66. See VI-40: SNIE 13-66, "Current Chinese Communist Intentions in the Vietnam Situation," August 4, 1966

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China's propaganda effort was soon overtaken by the massive Red Guard movement, and INR felt that the Chinese press had begun to downgrade the Vietnam issue. For example, in September, the Chinese publicized as US aggression a number of alleged US overflights and attacks on Chinese territory, but for the first time failed to link the allegations to the Vietnam war. INR felt that Peking's propaganda had the effect of reducing the threat of Chinese intervention in Vietnam, while maintaining stress on the more remote prospect of US aggression against China and on preparations for that contingency.

Not that INR dismissed the Chinese threat. It continued to report--though with less frequency--Peking's maintenance and enlargement of its presence in North Vietnam and of its air defense posture in South China, as well as the fact that Chinese transshipment of Soviet military aid to North Vietnam was generally adequate. But as the Cultural Revolution progressed, and when the Chinese showed no military reaction to the strikes on the Hanoi-Haiphong area in July, INR touched less upon the possibility that the Chinese would intervene directly and deliberately in the air over North Vietnam. INR's position in the fall of 1966 can be summarized as follows: "it appears that at the war's current level of intensity, which involves neither a threat of invasion of North Vietnamese or Chinese territory nor the destruction of the Hanoi regime, the Chinese will not actively and openly intervene in the fighting."⁶⁷

67. See VI-41: RFE-41, "The Vietnam War: Situation and Prospects," October 11, 1966 - S/NF/LD

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The Efficacy of Further Escalation

In the spring of 1967, INR considered the probable results of a JCS proposal to expand military pressure against North Vietnam, with restrictions only against invasion and upon deliberate bombing of population centers or dams and dikes related to agriculture. INR concluded that the program would "raise the level of violence without bringing Hanoi any closer to compromise," would probably result in a new stalemate because China could be expected to underwrite the war, and would lead to greater "Chinese acceptance of the risk of confrontation with the United States."⁶⁸

As before, INR believed that such a program would not force Hanoi to make any significant change in its policy in the six months or so required to bring the augmented pressures to maximum effectiveness. But the paper's definition of the longer-term problem involved some change from past INR estimates of the Chinese role, and, for the first time, INR wrestled with the question of the timing of a North Vietnamese collapse and what might be involved in it.⁶⁹ INR concluded that the North Vietnamese would seek, and the Chinese would provide increased aid to keep Hanoi's war effort on track, and that, as Hanoi's requirements grew, Chinese support would keep pace. Thus, as the bombing went on

68. See VI-42: RFE-MM, "Probable NV and Chinese Reactions to Augmented Military Pressure Against North Vietnam," April 12, 1967,
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69. The paper held that the following consequences would be considered by the Hanoi regime to connote the prospect of its own collapse: a disintegration in its administrative fabric and its capacity to run the country effectively, as well as to sustain the effort in the South; a depletion of its assets in the South; and the danger that continued bombing would involve targets affecting agricultural output or might presage invasion.

and Hanoi faced the prospect of collapse, direct Chinese intervention would become likely and, with it, a greater risk of war with the United States. In place of a sudden Chinese air engagement of US planes over the DRV, INR now envisaged that the Chinese might involve themselves piecemeal; they might send some security and infantry units as a warning against invasion, give publicity to Chinese AAA units, considerably expand their logistical presence, and announce sanctuary for North Vietnamese aircraft in China. Peking would undertake these moves accepting the risks and fully aware that the United States might be moved to carry the war to China. INR also emphasized Hanoi's growing loss of its freedom of action to China, a loss which Hanoi would accept reluctantly as a price for forestalling collapse.

Throughout the rest of the period, INR reported continuously on Chinese activities related to Vietnam, as well as Chinese reactions to escalatory moves by the US. For example, when concern about increased Chinese involvement rose in the late fall of 1967,⁷⁰ INR thought it was "highly possible" that Peking might calculate that certain actions would help the North Vietnamese war effort and still not run undue risk of American reaction. Thus, INR believed, while massive or active intervention in the fighting remained unlikely unless circumstances drastically altered, Peking might permit North Vietnamese planes to fly operational missions over North Vietnam from Chinese bases, might increase its military contingent or move limited numbers of ground

70. See Special Annex V

forces into northern North Vietnam, or even provide North Vietnam with
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a Komar guided missile boat for attacks against the Seventh Fleet.

In fact, Peking did not undertake any of these measures.

Washington again considered various escalatory moves in the wake of the Tet offensive, including the dispatch of an additional 200,000 US troops to South Vietnam and a sharply expanded bombing program in the North. INR felt that Hanoi would respond by increasing its commitment of forces in the South and that Peking, at Hanoi's request, would fill "any gaps" in the North created by the additional expenditure of North Vietnamese assets in the South. In response to the closing of Haiphong by mines or blockade, INR thought the Chinese would do more to facilitate transshipment of supplies through China. If the United States undertook an all-out conventional bombing of the North, there was "a strong possibility" that Chinese pilots in MIG's with North Vietnamese markings would engage US bombers, but overt intervention was likely only if the scope of the bombing "seemed intended" to destroy North Vietnam as a viable Communist state.

The paper attempted to define two levels of Chinese response to an invasion of North Vietnam. INR felt that Peking probably would react to an invasion which seemed limited to the southern portion by stationing forces in the northern area to free NVA troops and to raise the spectre of a US-Chinese conflict if the US persisted. On the other hand, if the Chinese believed the US intended to destroy the DRV regime,

71. See VI-43: REA-MM-67-144, "China's Scope for Augmented Vietnam Participation," December 16, 1967, SECRET/LD

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then intervention "on a massive scale" could be expected. With the de-escalation and the moves toward negotiations which began on March 31, these questions became academic, and INR produced no further estimate of the prospects for a Sino-US conflict growing out of the Vietnam war.

72. See VI-44: REA-MM-68-47, "Probable Chinese Responses to Certain US Courses of Action in Indochina," March 1, 1968, SECRET

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