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V - Trial by Force: March 1965-February 1966:

Background:

During this phase, the Communists increased their conventional military strength and operations, while maintaining their primary emphasis on guerrilla tactics, whereas the US and the GVN, as they continued the counterinsurgency effort, gave increasing priority to conventional operations. By November 1965, Communist forces were known to include at least five full regiments of the NVA and the presence of two more was confirmed during the month. Estimates of over-all Communist strength, including support forces, increased from 160,000 to roughly 260,000. ARVN forces increased from 246,000 to 302,000 and US forces from 40,000 personnel acting in an advisory or supporting capacity to 201,000 troops engaged in full and independent combat operations. Beginning in March 1965 with limited air strikes against military targets below the 20th parallel, the US expanded the scope and nature of its targets to include virtually all of North Vietnam, save the enclaves of Hanoi, Haiphong, and the Chinese border area as well as certain major industrial targets. By the end of this phase, virtually every conventional air and land weapon in the US operational inventory was employed on a regular if limited basis. The US had suffered over 11,000 casualties and had lost 351 aircraft in action. President Johnson had submitted to Congress a budget including \$10.5 billion for expenditures on Vietnam and an additional \$9.1 billion of new obligational authority.

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By February 1966 trends in South Vietnam could be interpreted as progress or at least as absence of further deterioration, but no indications pointed either to a military victory or to a negotiated settlement satisfactory to the US or the GVN. The new government under Premier Ky showed a capacity for survival but did not gain popular support. Evidence accumulated that Communists were suffering considerable casualties and losing control of some areas; but there were no signs of qualitative change in the relative potential of each side.

During this period, the US offered to hold unconditional talks with North Vietnam in public or in private and with or without a halt of the bombing. It made a bombing halt contingent, however, on Hanoi's curtailing support for the Viet Cong, and authoritative press comments further interpreted US conditions to include a cease-fire in the South. The US also offered economic aid to North Vietnam should a negotiated settlement be achieved. Hanoi's public position remained that the US must "recognize" Hanoi's "Four Points" and unconditionally and permanently halt bombing before talks could start. The Communists also held that some form of recognition of the NLF was a precondition for a settlement of the situation if not for talks.

Regardless of the gap that seemed to exist between the position announced by the US and what was supposed to be the position privately held by Hanoi, the US undertook two unilateral pauses in the bombing to discover what Hanoi's response would be. The first, May 12-18, 1965, followed two months of limited air strikes on military installations up to the

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20th parallel and preceded the introduction of major US units into the South. The second, from December 24, 1965 to January 31, 1966, followed seven more months of air strikes throughout much of the DRV and the introduction of sizable US and third country forces into the South. At the end of this period, the US resumed and then intensified the bombing of the North and launched a major effort to create a viable social, political, and economic structure in the South.

The questions during these months were how much intervention by US and allied ground forces was necessary, and what were appropriate roles for foreign and indigenous forces in pursuit of victory. Top US officials responsible for the war faced the additional problem of winning "within an acceptable time frame."

Summary:

During the first half of 1965, the issue of deploying US combat troops became paramount, and required appraisal of ARVN's capabilities. At the beginning of the year, the military participants in the Intelligence Community had, as in the past, felt that CIA and INR were not giving ARVN its due when they noted its lack of capacity to defeat the enemy or reduce his will to continue the war. All agreed, however, that ARVN, despite its deficiencies, was still able to meet most VC attacks without further US support and to fight well enough to preserve a stalemate.

In April, all hands recognized that regular NVA units had deployed across the northern part of South Vietnam. MACV then became alarmed

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over ARVN's weakness, especially after the collapse of several combat battalions, and called for 80,000 US combat troops. It also planned a change of assignment, so that the bulk of the ARVN would shift from main force warfare to protecting heavily populated fixed targets, while US and ARVN elite forces would seek out and destroy the enemy main force in the sparsely populated regions of the country, especially inland in the mountains. INR now found itself facing a new perspective, and while it still recognized that ARVN had weaknesses, it maintained that the balance of forces had not shifted sufficiently to make US combat troops necessary. Nor did it feel that the enemy would soon have the capacity for sustained large-scale operations, or that he would set up a territorially-based government in the Central Highlands. Holding to its earlier view that the enemy would persist in his traditional pattern at a rising level of intensity, INR did note that he had started on a new tack, assaulting lines of communication. On the other hand, INR did not believe that even a large infusion of American troops and an intensified bombing campaign would bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion as quickly as advocates of this policy hoped. INR drew this conclusion from the unconventional nature of the conflict, which would prevent US forces from rapidly discovering and destroying enemy formations or blocking his capacity to reinforce them.

At year's end INR judged the war to be stalemated and observed that US forces had played the major role in preventing deterioration. But it again noted that these intense American efforts had not brought the war closer to a favorable conclusion and had hardly affected Communist

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capacities for unconventional, guerrilla warfare. Moreover, the success of search-and-destroy operations rested on the enemy's willingness to stand and fight. In short, the Communists still enjoyed the initiative in combat.

The Communist position on negotiations became, for INR, closely linked to US escalation. Before the bombing of the North, INR discerned in Communist policy a "soft" probing line, intended at least in part to avert escalation; after the bombing began, the Communists wanted to avoid negotiations which they would have had to conduct under duress and subject to US pressure. INR therefore expected the Communists to respond with military pressure--for example, through involvement of Chinese air power--to redress the balance before they would renew signals toward negotiation.

After the announcement of Hanoi's Four Points in April 1965, INR scrutinized closely any variations in Hanoi's public statements, looking for indications that might suggest how interested in talks North Vietnam was. During the bombing pause in May 1965, INR estimated that Hanoi would not make concessions toward negotiations though it wanted the pause to continue; in general it believed that North Vietnam was interested in opening an exchange without signaling an interest in compromise. At mid-year, INR judged that Hanoi was seriously interested in the possibility of bilateral contacts, but would make no concession for a bombing halt, and would reject a pause that was coupled with an ultimatum or a demand for reciprocity. INR estimated that an unannounced pause, if handled carefully, would be the most likely means of opening the way to

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substantive talks. During the pause at year's end, however, it noted only a slight indication of interest on Hanoi's part.

Estimates of probable Communist reactions to further intensification of the war by the US elicited increasingly intense differences of opinion in the Intelligence Community. In line with its past estimates, INR was more drastic than other members of the Community in drawing conclusions from intelligence on military cooperation between China and the DRV and on Chinese war preparations on the Mainland. It noted as before both that the increase in Chinese verbal threats had the purpose of boosting VC morale and deterring further US troop inputs, and that, as these threats became more specific, they also reflected a deeper commitment to aid North Vietnam. The more US air and ground efforts grew, the more strongly INR, with some backing from other agencies, felt that additional US intensification of the war would raise a very real prospect of China becoming engaged in the air and possibly on the ground. INR also judged that Hanoi would not be moved toward negotiating by the escalation, but would be more determined to fight on.

While the Intelligence Community as a whole recognized Peking's willingness to risk a major conflict with the US to defend its vital interests (though these interests were often not specifically defined), INR repeatedly found itself more ready than other members to expect Chinese entry under specific future contingencies involving Vietnam. Being prepared in general to anticipate a strong Chinese reaction in

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the air, INR estimated that Peking was most likely to act in response to a strike against the Hanoi-Haiphong complex, and that the resulting air encounters could lead to a wider war. By the same token, INR also concluded that China would allow its bases to be used by the North Vietnamese to defend North Vietnam. In response to a query concerning reaction by the Chinese to a strike against their own bases, INR felt more strongly than other agencies that China would not moderate its policy but would respond aggressively.

In one major Estimate in September 1965, INR dissented entirely over the question of what would result from a massive attack on the Northeast quadrant, assaults on thermal power plants, and follow-up armed reconnaissance; INR thought that the Communists would intensify the war, contrary to the majority view that they would incline to negotiate. INR judged that, as a response to pressure of this sort together with a US ground build-up, North Vietnam would step up the war in the South, while China would provide material support required and introduce its own forces in the North to replace North Vietnamese troops as needed. The Soviets, however reluctantly, would increase their aid and their political pressure on the US.

Finally, INR dissented from the view that air attacks which hurt North Vietnam's logistical capacity would lead Hanoi to consider negotiations, since it believed that sufficient LOC's would survive to handle the needs in the South. In general, INR judged that the bombing was

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having minimal effects against Communist morale and the capacity of the North to make war--that on the contrary, the attacks enabled Hanoi to increase controls, exploit nationalist feeling, and mobilize the populace more effectively.

The US Joins the Ground War

INR's assessment of Communist strength and capabilities at the beginning of this phase were [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] that the Viet Cong retained the initiative and had built up forces to an estimated 50-60,000 regulars and 100,000 irregulars.

[REDACTED]

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At the same time, INR could find no evidence that the VC were weakening: "every indication we can glean...suggests that their [the VC] determination to continue the war...is increasing, not decreasing."

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2. See V-1: MM-RFE-65-86, "Evaluation of Evidence of Viet Cong 'Regroupment North,'" March 25, 1965

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Nor could INR attribute to intensified air attacks the overall lull in Communist armed attacks suggested by MACV statistics--and it pointed to the parallel "sharp acceleration in VC terrorist and sabotage activities."

By April, all Washington intelligence agencies agreed that the Communist build-up in South Vietnam's northern provinces included NVA units [redacted]

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[redacted] In contrast, Secretary McNamara's report on the April Honolulu Conference argued that recent weeks had seen "a somewhat favorable change in the overall situation as the result of air attacks on the DRV." However, success on the ground being essential if favorable results were to be achieved "within an acceptable time frame," the report proposed the introduction of 80,000 US and other allied troops in addition to US forces already deployed for base security. [redacted]

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3. See V-2: IN, "South Vietnam--A Lull in Armed Attacks?" Apr. 24, 1965. NOTE: This apparent lull turned out to be primarily the product of a change MACV made in its reporting definitions in October 1964, which was not known in Washington until January 1966.

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By June no decision regarding further US troop deployment had been reached, and MACV was reporting a serious "gap" between enemy and allied forces. This "gap" appeared primarily in combat effectiveness rather than in numbers, and reflected increased ARVN casualties and desertions, and delays in the recruitment and training of the eleven new ARVN battalions scheduled to meet rising enemy strength. MACV again proposed that the gap be filled with US troops. INR concurred with MACV's assessment of ARVN weaknesses and VC strength, but did not find in them a recent or radical shift in the overall balance of forces. More important, INR disagreed with MACV's implication that the war effort might collapse completely if US forces were not deployed. It also doubted that the advantages of deploying US forces would necessarily outweigh the disadvantages that would result if the US assumed greater responsibility for the war.

INR also requested that MACV clarify the divergence between its views cited above and the tenor of a simultaneous MACV weekly military report which placed the build-up in ARVN forces slightly ahead of schedule. MACV replied that five ARVN battalions had been lost on the battlefield in the preceding three weeks and that casualties and desertions had forced a moratorium on the formation of new battalions until losses in existing units had been replaced. A following FLASH cable reported the loss of another battalion and the development of a critical situation in the

6. COMUS MACV cable 19118, 07335Z, June 7, 1965

7. MM-RFE 65-10/1-2, "Comments on COMUSMACV Recommendations," June 8, 1965

8. Deptel 2873, June 11, 1965

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Dong Xoai area that would possibly require, in MACV's view, the intervention of two US airborne battalions heretofore assigned to base security. MACV judged that the RVNAF forces could not stand up to the Communist offensive without substantial US combat support on the ground, and renewed its previous request for an additional two Marine battalions, a US airmobile division, a ROK division, tactical air units, and the necessary command and logistic supporting forces, totaling over 80,000 troops.

A more important element in MACV's concept was that two wars now existed. In addition to the continuing security threat to the local population from VC terrorist and guerrilla activities, there was now an additional threat to the country as a whole from the Communists' expanding conventional effort. The terror-guerrilla threat could be met effectively only by the South Vietnamese themselves, but, MACV argued, the conventional effort required that the US play a role because ARVN could not manage it alone. MACV pointed out that the ARVN had recently reinforced the mountainous Kontum area against the VC main force, leaving the heavily populated coast areas unguarded. MACV further speculated that the VC might hope to seize the Kontum plateau and establish a government and territorial entity which would be recognized "from China to Cambodia."

Until now, US policy had rested on the concept that the ARVN would engage enemy main force units and that local paramilitary forces would provide security to hamlets. MACV now proposed a new approach, assigning the bulk of the regular South Vietnamese army to protect

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heavily-populated fixed targets along the coast, around Saigon, and in the Delta, while US forces and elite ARVN elements would engage in search-and-destroy operations against hard-core VC units. These operations would be conducted in the scarcely-populated areas where massive US weaponry would be less likely to endanger civilians.

INR expressed its reservations over MACV's assessment and its concept alike. "We continue to see room for the possibility that the South Vietnamese forces still possess a greater degree of resistance and staying power than is suggested by the MACV messages." Although it recognized that for planning one had to take into account the most unfavorable contingencies, and that in fact the VC had improved their capabilities in firepower, strength, and organization, nonetheless: "Even if there should be a massive infusion of PAVN forces, the Communists would still require some time to develop within South Vietnam the logistic capability that would enable them to sustain large-scale operations." Thus, "it is premature to assume that the Communists have abandoned the pattern of a relatively low but periodically peaking level of attacks accompanied by a high and generally rising level of terrorism, harassment, and sabotage."

As for the Kontum-Pleiku area, "there is clearly a serious threat that the Communists will mount a major assault in this area, [but] it

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9. COMUSMACV 20055, June 13, 1965, and Saigon 4074 and 4265. MACV's full request for troops was not met, but Secretary McNamara announced on June 16 the decision to increase US strength by some 16 to 21,000 troops.

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does not necessarily follow that they will do so with the intention of establishing a fixed and announced territorial base for a Front government." The advantages to the VC of so doing would be minimal. Even more important, it was by no means certain that US forces would in fact be able to engage Communist main force units in this area. "The terrain in the highlands, despite MACV's contention that it offers fewer difficulties than other areas, does provide the Communists a substantial opportunity to maneuver, disperse, or simply hide for extended periods of time....We cannot assume that the Communists, faced with forces superior to ARVN, will respond with large-scale or multiple company or battalion operations which are more easily 'fixed' by intelligence and more vulnerable to air strikes."

Thus, INR concluded, "there is unlikely to be a major change in the nature of the warfare conducted by the Communists....We also believe that the MACV proposals fail to address themselves to the possibilities that still remain for improving the deployment strength, and tactical capabilities of ARVN and the paramilitary forces, whose central role must remain more than a facade if we are to avoid over-reliance on the US role with all the political consequences that this would entail."¹⁰

In early July, the US began the build-up of its combat forces in South Vietnam which had been announced in mid-June. INR concurred with an FE/VN memo that the prevailing confidence between US advisers and their counterparts would probably avert serious repercussions from the

10. See V-3: MM-RFE, "MACV's Proposals for Deployment of US Forces in South Vietnam," June 25, 1965

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build-up, but that attempts to establish unilateral US controls over the GVN military establishment or the GVN would be catastrophic, and that disillusionment with the US would probably increase should the war drag on indefinitely.

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As for the Communist intentions, INR noted the larger scale of the VC effort in the current monsoon offensive but believed the overall picture did not suggest that the VC's investment in "multibattalion attacks" was "a crucial one from which they necessarily anticipate a decisive pay-off" in the near future. In contrast to MACV's view, INR found "little in their pattern of activities compared with previous years to suggest that their current campaign, although an active one, is intended to be decisive." Thus, the VC still did not believe "that if political victory does not come soon it will never come at all," and they "could well conclude that they have a substantial cushion for some time to come."

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Nor did the pattern of VC activities suggest that they were moving into the so-called "third phase" of warfare as defined by General Giap, or had the capacity to do so. Rather, at a "time when the impact of substantial US ground reinforcements is only beginning to be felt, it must be clear to the Communists that any prospects they may have had for a total military victory in South Vietnam have diminished, possibly to the point of disappearance. Under these circumstances, we cannot see

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11. MM-RFE-65-185, "Impact in South Vietnam of Substantial Increase in Deployment of US Forces," July 13, 1965
 12. See V-4: RM, RFE-28, "Viet Cong Expectations--Victory in 1965?" July 15, 1965

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them resorting to a strategy that would substantially increase their vulnerability to US power, except as an act of desperation...for immediate negotiating purposes. We believe that they are still far from such a point of desperation, that they still see themselves as in a position of strength--derived from the weakness and instability of the GVN as well as their own significant still unutilized forces." Thus, "the VC will continue to employ guerrilla tactics with only intermittent recourse to spectacular, multi-battalion attacks against major ARVN targets."¹³

INR did note, however, that recent Communist operations against GVN lines of transportation and communications suggested an effort to bring the war home to the hitherto relatively secure but politically volatile urban population, and that such a campaign might foreshadow a political and subversive effort in the cities.¹⁴ While not yet as capable as the Buddhists in producing urban disturbances, the VC could nonetheless be expected to turn increasing attention in this direction. The NLF demonstrated its intentions along these lines in October when it announced a "Month of Hatred" for the US, to include a general strike and anti-US demonstrations in the cities. INR believed that the effort would not produce much response and that, by putting their prestige behind the effort, "the Communists have made a major miscalculation"

13. See V-5: MM-RFE-65-192, "Giap's Third Phase in South Vietnam?" July 23, 1965

14. See *ibid* and V-6, IN, "Viet Cong Strategy May Aim at Disrupting Urban Centers," July 30, 1965.

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regarding their strength and the mood in the cities. In fact,
the Communist appeal went almost unnoticed.

When an extended bombing pause was being considered on the eve of Christmas and Tet holidays, INR reviewed the situation and made two fundamental judgments: first, "we see as yet no prospect for a qualitative change in the situation necessary to provide us with victory. Instead, what the six months of massive US troop deployment and heavy US air strikes seem to have obtained is a stalemate, albeit at higher levels of violence on both sides than had earlier characterized the war"; second, "we are impressed by the degree to which the situation in South Vietnam remains highly localized and resists accurate country-wide generalization...we find that widely scattered assets still offer promise of offsetting the stagnation and ineffectiveness that beset Saigon. We remain concerned about the intelligence gaps, both qualitative and quantitative, that make definitive statements about any particular facet virtually impossible."
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Specifically, INR attributed the new momentum of the war to US intervention, which had on the one hand denied the Communists the victories they had previously enjoyed over the ARVN, but on the other stimulated them to new levels of activity so that they retained both the initiative and the ability to increase the size and number of their attacks. ARVN morale had improved but desertions had increased; the

15. See V-7: RFE-45, "The 'Month of Hatred' in Vietnam and the Berkeley Teach-In," October 14, 1965

16. See V-8: Cover memo from Mr. Hughes to the Secretary over RFE-53, December 21, 1965

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GVN had accepted the key importance of pacification, but continued to show no significant progress in implementing it. Communist forces had suffered heavy losses and morale had been strained; but Communist strength had increased and morale had not affected performance on the battlefield. Whatever hopes the Viet Cong leaders may have had for an early military victory had been shattered, but they remained determined to pursue the war "even at the cost of further escalation both there and in the North."¹⁷ The Intelligence Community also agreed that, despite the assault on the infiltration routes and possibly higher losses, Viet Cong capabilities had not been significantly impaired. A SNIE predicted that the Communists could double their forces during the coming year, and even should they then increase their operations five-fold, they would still be able to supply their forces.¹⁸

On the recurring issue of VC use of Cambodian territory, INR maintained its position that "although the Communists continue to infiltrate personnel and supplies from Cambodia, as well as to use the Cambodian border for sanctuary, they do so on a limited basis and without the support of central government authorities in Phnom Penh."¹⁹ INR agreed that the RKG was not making strenuous efforts to control VC activities, but noted that there was no evidence of official collusion; and a USIB

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17. See V-9: RFE-53, "The Balance Sheet in South Vietnam," Dec. 21, 1965
 18. SNIE 10-12-65, December 10, 1965, [REDACTED] B1
 19. See V-10: RFE-50, "Recent Intelligence on Viet Cong Use of Cambodian Territory," December 2, 1965

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study in November 1965 held that Cambodia was far less important as a source of men and supplies than was procurement within South Vietnam.

Prospects for Peace

A - Spring, 1965: As the program of continued strikes against the North began, INR attempted to determine the prevailing Communist attitude toward a negotiated settlement. There was a difference between the Chinese and North Vietnamese positions in that the former would reject negotiations per se, but the latter had left the door open.²⁰ Further, INR pointed out, contrary to public impression and even some US official statements, neither Hanoi nor Peking had specifically made a US withdrawal a pre-condition for negotiations.²¹ There were tenuous indications that both might be willing to discuss Vietnam indirectly in the context of a conference on Laos or Cambodia, and even for the Chinese a halt in the bombing was the only pre-condition for talks, with perhaps no more than prior agreement in principle on eventual US withdrawal.²²

In late March, INR tried to deduce from the attitudes of Asian Communists toward the bombing program, what their posture was likely to be toward negotiations in the future. It found that there had prevailed during January, when talk of escalation had filled the air, a "soft"

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20. IN, "Possible Hanoi-Peiping Difference on Negotiations about Vietnam," March 4, 1965
 21. MM-RFE-65-75, "Asian Communists Do Not Make US Withdrawal a Precondition for Negotiations on Vietnam," March 12, 1965
 22. MM-RFE-65-93, "Chou En-lai and a Cambodian Conference," March 26, 1965

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phase in which Hanoi appeared receptive to talks, if not compromise, followed by a hardening, first on the part of Peking, after the initial retaliatory strikes on February 7 and 8, 1965, and then by Hanoi in March. The Communist stance, INR thought, could be explained as follows: "First, it was evident in the fall of 1964 that the Viet Cong could not achieve a total victory in the immediate future, certainly not before the US could embark on its long-discussed program of escalation....barring a sudden change, as of December no combination [of events]...promised to collapse the GVN and expel US forces from South Vietnam, at least not for some time to come....Second, the long-signalled US threat of escalation remained an active one that could materialize in the very near future." The paper stated that if the Asian Communists had made these overtures in order to probe US interest in talks (as the paper implicitly suggested was the case), then Washington's failure to respond would probably have been interpreted as a deliberate rebuff, not simply as a failure of communication.

With the onset of continuous bombing on March 2, Hanoi as well as Peking rejected all contact in order not to appear willing to negotiate under duress. More important, INR suggested, Hanoi and Peking might have concluded that, "regardless of what hints of American interest in negotiations come to light, we [the US] are not willing to settle for anything remotely acceptable to the Asian Communists and are instead determined to gamble on our escalation as forcing acceptance of our terms, even if that escalation risks another Korean war."

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The Asian Communist states, INR then felt, would supply deterrent pressure through the threat of escalation. This would most likely take some form of selective Chinese military involvement, probably active air support for North Vietnam. Only after such a response would political signals again come from Hanoi or Peking. If Hanoi was faced with the choice of the irrevocable loss of the South through concession to US demands or dependence on Peking, INR believed that it would probably invite in the Chinese.

Pham Van Dong's Four Points of April 1965 comprised severe demands, but appeared to INR to represent a change, albeit minor, in Hanoi's position, insofar as the statement indicated that talks would be possible. INR believed that Dong's announcement probably reflected concern over the international effects of Hanoi's intransigence but that it also may have been intended as a probe of President Johnson's offer of unconditional negotiations in his Johns Hopkins address of

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April 7. As long as the bombing continued, INR asserted, considerations of face would most likely stop Hanoi from taking the initiative for talks or accepting a conference on Vietnam, but the North might agree to private talks if they were kept secret, or to informal discussions in the context of a conference on Laos or Cambodia.

If we halted our attacks and proposed talks on the basis of reciprocity

23. See V-11: Whiting memo, "Asian Communist Reactions to US Escalation in Vietnam," March 20, 1965

24. See V-12: IN, "Hanoi Lays Down 'Basis' for Vietnam Talks," April 23, 1965

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in the South, Hanoi might try to determine whether negotiations would lead to a role for the NLF in the GVN, but would not halt supplies to the Viet Cong or withdraw their cadre.²⁵

In the South, INR noted, the Buddhists had favored a continued war effort over negotiations, though Tam Chau and Tri Quang made ambiguous statements which appeared to support a negotiated settlement.²⁶ Should the Buddhists veer toward negotiations, INR judged, the ambivalence within the South Vietnamese Army over the Buddhist-Catholic conflict would probably be resolved against the Buddhists. The GVN itself had consistently refused to negotiate with the NLF and had refused to negotiate at all before the Communists withdrew armed units and cadre. But what views, if any, it held on timing or modalities for negotiations were not known. The GVN recognized that a stronger military effort against the Viet Cong was essential to support negotiations, but it was not clear whether the GVN would negotiate only after a Communist military defeat or would settle for something short of this. In any event, there had been little evidence of defeatism during the past year among either the government or the public.²⁷

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25. See V-13: MM-RFE-65-123, "Negotiating Under Pressure--Hanoi's Position," April 23, 1965
 26. IN, "The Buddhist Position on Negotiations by Vietnam," February 24, 1965
 27. See V-14: RFE-23, "Vietnamese Positions on a Negotiated Settlement," May 18, 1965

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On May 12, 1965, the United States informed Hanoi that it would suspend the bombing for one week, and called for a reciprocal de-escalation of Viet Cong action in the South. Reconnaissance [REDACTED] were not curtailed, but the air strikes over the North were suspended until May 19. INR did not observe significant changes in the pattern of Communist activities in South Vietnam or hopeful signs of response from Hanoi during the brief pause which ended on May 18. Information later received led INR to believe, in retrospect, that an approach of Mai Van Bo to French officials in Paris on May 18 had been more than a gesture to gain extension of an unreciprocated pause and that it may have been an attempt to probe the US position. INR estimated, however, that Hanoi was not anxious for negotiations and would not make significant concessions to obtain them. Similarly, when Kosygin suggested to Ambassador Harriman in July that the US make some counterproposal to Pham Van Dong's Four Points, INR suggested that Hanoi "may have some interest in opening an exchange" although it had not yet signalled its purpose or its possible compromise position.

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B - Summer and Fall: After the US resumed bombing and built up combat troops in July, INR concluded that Hanoi had in the preceding half year several times shown interest and was now seriously weighing the possibilities of negotiations. INR felt that Hanoi would prefer bilateral

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29. RSB-MM, "Kosygin's Suggestion of an American Counterproposal to the Four Points," July 24, 1965, SECRET/EXDIS

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talks and that third party channels probably would not work. Hanoi probably had no military preconditions for discussions--perhaps for private contact not even a bombing halt would be necessary--but it appeared adamant about having from the US some form of prior recognition of the Four Points. Hanoi would also insist that the US recognize the NLF at some point as something more than Hanoi's agent. Hanoi was probably prepared for further US escalation but would prefer if possible to divert it; thus, Hanoi "may be receptive to counter-proposals now and should become more so as the full application of US power nears but before it becomes so heavy as to require overt Chinese involvement." INR considered Hanoi to be free of any entanglements with either Moscow or Peiping which would complicate bilateral negotiations, but that Hanoi had some need to respond to the interests of the NLF and in any case could not sell out or appear anxious to negotiate simply because of US strikes.

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30. See V-15: RFE-29, "North Vietnam and Negotiations," July 28, 1965

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30. See V-15: RFE-29, "North Vietnam and Negotiations," July 28, 1965

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also reject or ignore a bombing pause based on reciprocity or one coupled with an explicit ultimatum. Even an unannounced pause would not quickly produce any response, but after a week or two, particularly if pressed by Moscow and neutral governments, Hanoi would feel compelled to respond in some fashion. US actions in the interim would be crucial since suspicion of US motives or willingness to compromise would weaken elements in Hanoi that favored negotiations; but if the US played its cards "just right," there would be "a fair chance that Hanoi's official response would contain encouraging as well as inflexible aspects."³⁴

INR believed that private probes would find Hanoi slightly more flexible, though its purpose might be merely to entangle the US so as to defer or prevent a resumption of the bombing. If, however, our objectives at this stage were no more than to engage Hanoi in negotiations "with substantive concessions to be extracted only later under the implicit threat of resumed attacks, there would be a good chance that it would mesh sufficiently with DRV objectives to permit some progress in this direction."³⁴

C - Winter: The Long Wait: On Christmas Eve, 1965, the US suspended strikes against North Vietnam as part of the Christmas truce. When ground actions resumed on the 26th, the bombing pause continued and remained in effect until January 31, 1966. During this pause, [REDACTED] bombing continued in Laos along the DRV border and reconnaissance continued over all of North Vietnam at twice the rate of sorties in previous months. B1

34. See V-17: RFE-MH, "Possible DRV Responses to a Pause," October 8, 1965

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On December 29, the US passed a message to Hanoi which pointed out that the bombing had been suspended since the 24th, and expressed the hope that the suspension could be extended beyond the new year in the absence of a "major provocation." Moreover, the message added, the "possibility" of a further "suspension" would be enhanced if the DRV would now "reciprocate" by making "a serious contribution toward peace."

INR did not have access to this message or to those who dealt with the ensuing contacts between representatives of the US and DRV for nearly a month, so that it was impossible for INR to judge Hanoi's reactions in the context of the terms to which it was reacting. Nevertheless, INR kept up a running analysis of Hanoi's public reactions on almost a daily basis.

On January 3, a Nhan Dan article confirmed Hanoi's negative reaction, though it reverted to the formula that the Four Points were the "most correct" rather than "the only" basis for negotiation. Throughout the pause, INR suggested that Hanoi, though "genuinely suspicious" of US motives, had not completely closed the door on the possibility of negotiations. It speculated that the North Vietnamese Charge's demarche to Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane on January 19 constituted "a genuine diplomatic effort to respond" to the pause and that "Hanoi may consider it has returned the ball to our court."³⁵

INR could not find any difference in the pattern of Viet Cong activity before and during the pause. Although no NVA units had apparently been

35. See V-18: RFE-HM, "Credibility of Hanoi 'Responding' Through Souvanna," January 19, 1966, SECRET

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engaged in attacks since November, the overall level of activity during January was somewhat higher than in 1965 and there was evidence to suggest that intensified attacks could be expected in the immediate post-Tet³⁶ period. In any event, INR interpreted the inaction of NVA units as evidence only that Hanoi did not wish to close the door to negotiations rather than as evidence that any decision in favor of negotiations and de-escalation might have been made.³⁷

On January 26, several days after Secretary Rusk had stated publicly that no positive response had yet been received from Hanoi, INR reviewed the factors which might inhibit Hanoi from engaging in negotiations-- beyond the commonly alleged argument that Hanoi still thought it could win a straight military victory. Besides having a strong distrust of negotiations per se, Hanoi would be inhibited by what it considered American violations of the 1954 Geneva Accords; the political posture and morale of the VC would be of prime concern and the effect of negotiations on them would have to be prepared for carefully; the negative position of the Chinese, who provided the ultimate guarantee of Hanoi's survival, could not be rejected out of hand; and, finally, Hanoi might be unable to envisage any acceptable compromise in the context of the existing US public

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36. See V-19: RFE-4, "Patterns of Communist Activity in South Vietnam Before and After the Pause," January 26, 1966; also V-20, RFE-HH, "UPI Story on Level of Viet Cong Military Activities," February 2, 1966
37. See V-21: RFE-3, "Why Is Hanoi Reluctant to Negotiate?" January 26, 1966

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position. This set of problems, indeed, might make the issue so complex for Hanoi that—while a negative decision had clearly not been made—
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 a positive decision might prove impossible.

On the same day, INR was asked to review the record of contacts and communications between representatives of the US and DRV. INR concluded that Hanoi was neither sincerely interested in negotiations nor attempting to entangle us in an indefinite and unreciprocated pause. It was more likely, rather, that Hanoi remained undecided as to how to respond to the US terms. Given the inhibiting factors cited above, INR could not conclude with confidence that more time would clarify Hanoi's position, "but we find the case sufficiently ambiguous to argue for such attempts at clarification before we decide to resume the bombing which, we believe, will close off for a considerable time to come any opportunity
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 for continuing political probes." Two days later, however, when Hanoi released Ho's highly negative letter written to the Communist chiefs of state, INR interpreted it as "an effort to explain Hanoi's failure to respond favorably to US overtures," and speculated that it might have been
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 written in anticipation of the end of the pause.

38. Id.

39. Informal RFE memo, "Hanoi's Political Response to our Pause,"
 January 26, 1966 TOP SECRET

40. See V-22: IN-61, "Ho Chi Minh Letter Explains Hanoi's Stand on Negotiations," January 28, 1966

Communist Military Reactions to Bombing Escalation, Actual and Estimated--Spring 1965:

INR closely monitored Communist verbal and military reactions to the bombing program, taking, as before, a concerned view of Chinese moves. A memorandum of March 20 reasoned, as noted above, that the Communists were unlikely to negotiate before redressing the military situation, and that the initial Communist reaction "most likely will be in the air." Since the purpose would be largely political, the act would entail a "visible, physical Chinese involvement," as "volunteers" at airfields, with MIG squadrons as "volunteer" units, the shadowing of American attack aircraft from Chinese bases, or even engagement of US planes in defense of the Hanoi-Haiphong complex. The paper concluded that it was "unlikely that Peiping would absent itself...once our attacks threaten vital targets in North Vietnam."⁴¹

The concern of the Chinese was reflected in their response to an appeal from the NLF on March 23, 1965, for assistance and to its threat to call for foreign manpower; Peking pledged to send its own men to fight with the South Vietnamese whenever they were wanted. INR saw this unprecedented Chinese commitment not only as an effort to boost Viet Cong morale and an attempt to deter further inputs of US combat forces, but also as a deepening of Peking's commitment to the war which brought it "closer to the point of no return in its obligation to support Hanoi should US

41. See V-11: "Asian Communist Reactions to U.S. Escalation in Vietnam," March 20, 1965 SECRET

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escalation persist. INR continued to comment on Chinese military preparations which appeared related to possible involvement in the war, at least in North Vietnam. At the same time, INR reported North Vietnamese efforts to prepare its populace for full-scale war, for the deployment of forces South, and for the possible arrival of Chinese or other foreign personnel.

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In a memorandum to the Acting Secretary on April 6, INR said that "the more specific those statements are the more difficult it will be not to back them up with deeds" if the United States is not

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deterred. Unlike other observers, INR did not think that a lull at this time in Chinese political agitation indicated reduced alarm, but wrote on April 23 that the lull could be intended to conceal Chinese
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intentions in order to forestall pre-emptive US action.

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- 42. See V-23: IN, "Peiping Promptly Endorses Viet Cong Statement, Expresses Readiness to Send Men," March 26, 1965
 - 43. See V-24: MM-RFE-65-102, "The Threat of Foreign Volunteers to Aid the Viet Cong," April 6, 1965
 - 44. See V-25: IN, "Peiping's Domestic Handling of the Vietnam Crisis," April 23, 1965

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[REDACTED] In addition, an NIE of May 5 noted Chinese preparations for at least limited conflict and concluded that if their "vital security interests" (not defined) in the area were threatened, the Chinese would be prepared "to risk" a major conflict with the United States.

Responding to concern that the Chinese might intercept US missions over the DRV, a SNIE of April 28 discussed possible Communist reactions to non-nuclear air strikes on Chinese territory. Participants other than INR estimated that there was "almost an even chance" that Peking would "break off the air battle and make political moves designed to dissuade the US from continuing its bombings of" North Vietnam at some point as the attacks on Chinese bases rose in intensity. "On balance," however, the SNIE held it "somewhat more likely" that the Chinese would make a major military response. INR, in a footnote, asserted that the aggressive Chinese course was "much more likely" and that it would come very soon after any continuation of US retaliatory strikes "if not immediately" after the initial strike.⁴⁶

During this period, INR continually assessed the effects of the bombings on North Vietnam itself. It concluded that the strikes had not

45. See V-26: USIB Memo, "Recent Indications of Communist Intentions in South Vietnam," April 9, 1965

46. See V-27: SNIE 10-5-65, "Communist Reactions to Certain US Action," April 28, 1965

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significantly harmed popular morale and that the regime, by increasing its controls and exploiting nationalism, may have been able to mobilize the populace more fully than heretofore. The cost to the economy, even of increasing military support for the Viet Cong, was judged to be minimal.⁴⁷

With the discovery that the Russians had provided eight IL-28's to Phuc Yen air base as well as SAM's and MIG's with Soviet advisers, concern arose that Moscow might be planning to send more offensive weapons, notably offensive missiles like the ones Khrushchev had sent to Cuba. Without being certain about Moscow's intent, INR leaned toward the view that the Russians meant their action as a warning that further escalation risked counterstrikes against targets in the South or US carriers. But, in assessing reactions to a single night-time B-52 raid on Phuc Yen and SAM sites near Hanoi, INR, on the assumption that the US would give a public explanation and make no other change in the air war, foresaw "no significant Communist response," such as Chinese air or ground intervention or Soviet counter-moves elsewhere.⁴⁸

When the Intelligence Community was asked shortly thereafter to consider the consequences of a broader action aimed at destroying all fighter aircraft as well as the IL-28's and SAM sites, it concluded that the

47. See V-28: IN, "Reactions in North Vietnam to US Strikes," May 3, 1965; also V-29: IN, "The Effects of the Bombings of North Vietnam," June 29, 1965

48. See V-30: MM-RFE-65-158, "Consequences of US Strike Against IL-28's and SAM's Near Hanoi," May 27, 1965

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action would not evoke any conciliatory response from Hanoi—only Air Force Intelligence thought the attacks would "markedly enhance" the odds on the DRV making conciliatory gestures. INR pointed out that, in this SNIE, the Intelligence Community as a whole now had come around to its view that Hanoi was willing to undergo considerable punishment in the North as a price for intensifying the struggle in the South. When the SNIE estimated that Peking would not allow its bases to be used to defend North Vietnam, INR again dissented in a footnote, arguing that the assumed US strikes "probably" would evoke the employment of Chinese fighters over the North from bases in China.⁴⁹ The Estimate concluded that Moscow "probably" would extend its new commitments to Hanoi and make up for the losses in materiel, with the possible exception of the IL-28's.

Summer, 1965: Communist Reactions to Air/Ground Escalation and Disputed Estimates:

The deployment of two US marine combat battalions in May and the publicized participation of US advisers in combat provoked renewed threats from Vietnamese Communists that they would increase attacks in the South. Since March, the presence in the South of regular NVA units had been known, but of course was not acknowledged by the Communists. On June 1, INR noted Peking's implicit suggestion that North Vietnamese forces might invade the South. INR concluded that, although Hanoi probably viewed a massive, quick strike southward as neither necessary nor advantageous, the action was a distinct possibility for the future.

49. See V-31: SNIE 10-6-65, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions," June 2, 1965

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As the American controversy over large-scale and direct US involvement deepened, INR reiterated its estimate that "at a time of its own choosing--when the prospect of tactical success is best or when the need to demonstrate support is greatest--Peking will enter the air over North Vietnam from Chinese bases against American planes." Recalling the general view that the prospect of large-scale attacks deterred Peking, the INR memorandum of June 24 declared: "Now, however, we must ask whether our increase in troops and geographical spread of air strikes do not make the prospect of our greater attacks so imminent...as to eliminate the deterrence factor altogether." ⁵⁰ At the very least, the increase in direct US involvement would impel Hanoi to build up its forces in the South rapidly, with guarantees from China of material and back-up manpower deemed necessary.

A SNIE of July 23 considered the intensified ground war and responded to a request that it evaluate a proposal to extend air strikes into the Hanoi-Haiphong area and along communication lines to China. It concluded (Air Force dissenting) that this bombing program would not significantly injure the ability of the VC to persevere, nor would it persuade Hanoi that the price of persisting was unacceptably high. Most participants did, however, estimate that a prolonged curtailment of supplies, including POL, from the North might lead the DRV to consider negotiations, being unable to sustain increased numbers of North Vietnamese

50. See V-32: Memo to the Under Secretary from INR/RFE, "Where Do We Go from Here?" June 24, 1965

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troops and large-scale Viet Cong operations. INR and the Army dissented on this point, believing that the lines of communication could support a considerably higher scale of warfare in the South.

The question of China's response became more controversial than ever. The SNIE moved toward INR's view by concluding that the chances of deliberate Chinese air intervention were "about even," a stand that reflected the personal concern of CIA Director Admiral Raborn. INR still dissented because it believed that the chances were "better than even." In another point of difference, CIA did not believe that even deliberate Chinese air intervention would lead to greatly increased Chinese participation in the conflict; in INR's view, deliberate encounters "could not fail to lead to a wider war." On the other hand, DIA, the three services, and NSA still believed it "unlikely" that Chinese planes would be sent over North Vietnam to engage US planes.⁵¹

INR itself, on July 7, estimated reactions to American interdiction of the maritime and rail accesses to North Vietnam. It judged that Soviet reaction would be politically hostile, but felt it "unlikely" that the Russians would try to run a blockade or pass a quarantine line which involved a search of their ships. The paper held that, under these circumstances, Moscow might make greater demands on Peking for use of land routes, and might send mine-sweepers to compensate Hanoi, but was "unlikely" to undertake serious retaliatory action against the US blockade

51. See V-33: SNIE 10-9-65, "Communist and Free World Reactions to a Possible US Course of Action," July 23, 1965

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or elsewhere. Likewise, INR thought it was "doubtful" that China would try to run convoys through blockade or quarantine lines, although there might be hit-and-run attacks on US naval vessels and Chinese planes "might" be launched to protect rail lines from China. The paper predicted that engineering and anti-aircraft units would be sent into North Vietnam to defend and repair communications.

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The continuing search for means of choking off the infiltration routes led to a proposal to send three divisions into the Lao panhandle, which was discussed in a SNIE of September 19. The Estimate held that the Communists would respond by putting pressure on Souvanna, making greater use of maritime infiltration routes, and harassing the US forces without engaging in any major offensive. It implied skepticism that the blocking action could actually interrupt infiltration.

Total Dissent: SNIE of September 1965:

Probably the single most controversial SNIE in this series was adopted by USIB on September 22 over INR's objections. The SNIE considered reactions to sudden, massive, and almost simultaneous air strikes against major airfields and LOC in the Hanoi-Haiphong area and between that area and China, against four thermal power plants and their defending SAM sites, and subsequent armed reconnaissance against rail and highway targets. Since its objections were so fundamental, INR decided to dissent from the entire Estimate. The rest of the Community estimated that this course of action was more likely to move North Vietnam toward negotiations, though

52. See V-34: RM-RSB-70, "Free World and Communist Bloc Reaction to US Interdiction of Maritime and Railway Access to North Vietnam," July 7, 1965, TOP SECRET

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after some period of time, than to an intensification of the conflict. INR dissented "fundamentally," believing that the Communists would see these efforts, especially if simultaneous, as "the highest level of militarily significant escalation available in the DRV short of ground invasion." Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow would also see the strikes as contradicting previous US indications that it recognized the special status of the Hanoi-Haiphong complex.

The plan would also belie US claims that its objectives were limited, since it would be a shift from strikes on the infiltration network to a broad military assault against the North's economy, its self-defense capability, and ultimately its ability to survive. Thus assessing US aims, Hanoi would be unlikely to choose negotiation or compromise, Peking would press Hanoi to persevere, and Moscow could not afford not to back Hanoi. The attacks also would stiffen North Vietnamese intransigence because Hanoi would feel that any compromise under pressure would wreck its credit and VC morale; it would demand and receive Soviet and Chinese aid with fewer qualms. North Vietnam probably would retaliate against the South by stepping up ground war.

Although Peking and Moscow would have more to say than heretofore about over-all Communist strategy, Hanoi and Peking, at least, would be on the same general track. The Chinese would offer safe haven to North Vietnamese planes, would permit use of Chinese bases, and would provide Chinese planes and pilots, if necessary, to operate from remaining usable North Vietnamese facilities. Augmented Chinese defensive measures would increase

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chances of accidental clashes with US planes, and the odds were better than even that Chinese planes would intervene from Chinese bases if North Vietnamese airfields were closed off. In backstopping North Vietnam, the Chinese, however reluctantly, might have to require greater Soviet involvement, and in any case would have to facilitate movement of increased Soviet aid to North Vietnam. The USSR would remain interested in ending the conflict but, however unhappy at dangers of escalation and confrontation, would nevertheless step up direct military assistance to North Vietnam as well as political pressure on the US, with the result of substantially worsening bilateral relations.

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Evidence of the Growing Chinese Threat—Fall, 1965:

INR was more concerned than its associates over the possibility that the Chinese Communists would involve themselves in the war over North Vietnam, not only because of its observations in analyzing Chinese statements, public and private, but also because of the considerable and growing evidence that the Chinese were making preparations against the possibility of direct conflict with the United States. For example, in November an INR paper reviewed Chinese actions in civil defense and the political field, undertaken on a nation-wide scale with restraint and often without

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53. See V-35 for full text of the dissent to SNIE 10-11-65, "Probable Communist Reactions to a US Course of Action," September 22, 1965

54. See Special Annex IV

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publicity, which clearly amounted to preparations for possible warfare.
The paper also discussed apparent increases in ground and air strength in
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South China.

On December 3, INR called attention to a series of ominous developments "which appear to reflect expectations in Peking that China's involvement in the Vietnam war, already manifested by the reported presence of People's Liberation Army engineer units in North Vietnam, may become overt in 1966 and may even submit the Chinese people to direct attack by the United States." The paper highlighted the movement since June of Chinese army units into North Vietnam, the construction or reactivation of five major airfields in South China, the concentration there of half of Peking's MIG-19 inventory, evidence of Sino-DRV air defense cooperation, and the preparation of the populace both psychologically and in matters of civil defense. INR did not believe these actions foreshadowed an "immediate" intervention and felt that Peking clearly wanted to keep its options open. "Nonetheless," INR concluded, "however illogical Chinese involvement might appear to be, the indicators of such a development are converging in time and context." INR declared it was impossible to predict "precisely when or under what particular circumstances Chinese Communist involvement is likely to become overt," but the evidence "indicates that Peking itself estimates the possibility

55. See V-36: RM, RFE-49, "Peking Prepares its People for Escalation of the Vietnam War," November 5, 1965


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of such overt involvement in 1966 to be a serious one." ⁵⁶ INR subsequently reported new evidence that suggested Hanoi was preparing its populace for more direct Chinese military involvement and reviewed intelligence on the presence of Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft units.

Year's End: The Dispute Continues:

In mid-December a SNIE heavily footnoted with dissenting opinions, again considered consequences of heavier air strikes, especially if in addition US forces were augmented by some 130,000 in six months; the USIB was also asked to assume that "at some point within the next year or so" the US/GVN forces appeared to be "clearly on the way to destroying the VC/PAVN capability for carrying on the insurgency at significant levels." ⁵⁷ Under these circumstances and assumptions, the SNIE concluded that "the odds are better than even" that the Communists would choose "some form of retrenchment rather than further escalation," while INR felt that the chances were only "a little better than even." DIA, NSA, and the service agencies felt as before that the long-run cumulative effects of the US actions might lead Hanoi to seek a cessation of the hostilities "as time goes on";



56. For full text, see V-37: Memo to the Secretary, "China and the War in Vietnam," December 3, 1965. See also Special Annex IV.

57. See V-38: SNIE 10-12-65, "Probable Communist Reactions to a US Course of Action," December 10, 1965

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INR's position on the possibility of Chinese intervention in the event of heavier air attacks had gained support from NSA in September and was now also backed by Army intelligence in the December SNIE. On the question of possible Chinese ground movement into North Vietnam, INR was alone in thinking that the Communists would see more advantages than disadvantages in this move. Both INR and the Army felt that the SNIE understated the threat of Chinese ground forces to mainland Southeast Asia. All agreed that danger of a war between China and the US lay more in a gradual series of rather minor escalations than in a deliberate and abrupt declaration by Peking.

This was the last time the Intelligence Community was asked to consider a broad course of action involving highly intensified air strikes.



INR was concerned about the risks of US escalation after the pause because it thought that Peking "has acted carefully but deliberately to increase its commitment of ground and air power to assist in the defense of North Vietnam."

58. The last SNIE in this period that focused on bombing, dated February 4, dealt exclusively with the effect of increased bombing on the insurgency in the South. The SNIE concluded that a cumulative drain would cause great difficulty but that the DRV still could move "substantially greater amounts" of men and materiel than it had in the previous year.

59. See V-39: RFE/MH to the Under Secretary, January 24, 1966. See also Special Annex IV

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INR Comments on Targeting:

Throughout the period, and in fact until the bombing was halted in 1968, INR spent considerable time commenting on proposed targets for the "Rolling Thunder" bombing missions against the North. The extent and regularity of INR's involvement in this area varied widely over the years. INR commented either at the request of Department officials or, at times, on its own when it learned informally of plans to hit important targets. During the period 1966-68, INR regularly cooperated with the military adviser of the Far East Bureau in preparing standardized sheets that gave information and recommendations on targets suggested by the JCS.

In general, when its opinion was requested, INR opposed targeting which maximized risk of contact with enemy aircraft, appeared to invite Chinese military reaction, involved the destruction of economic targets unrelated to military needs, or seemed likely to do significant civilian damage.⁶⁰ In addition to giving what it considered to be full weight to the risks involved and to the political costs, INR also took a more skeptical view of the military advantages than did the Pentagon. INR's role essentially was that of critic of target proposals. Only on occasion, as in the case of Phuc Yen in May 1965 or in proposing from 1966 onward a concentration on routes associated with infiltration, did INR make specific recommendations for strikes.

60. INR also attempted to assess civilian casualties, often with little or delayed assistance from the military intelligence agencies.

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