

The Enemy

Our view of Viet Nam must include the best possible estimate of the enemy situation. This estimate should evaluate not only the position of the Vietnamese Communist Party, including its Southern apparatus, the PRP, but also the roles of the Soviet Union and of Communist China. Our view, moreover, should take into account the effect of our possible options in Viet Nam on longer-range US relations with both of these powers.

The Vietnamese Communist Party (hereafter, for brevity's sake, referred to as Hanoi), despite the major US commitment in Viet Nam of the last 4 years remains in a reasonably strong position. It is probably prepared and able to continue its present level of military effort for at least three years, given continuation of external assistance at above the same 1. level as now exists. At the same time, Hanoi is probably prepared to negotiate a political settlement which it would regard as an acceptable interim step in seizure of the South. The key facets of such a settlement would probably be withdrawal of US forces, a coalition government in Saigon and "legalization" of Communist authority over all rural areas presently under Viet Cong control.

Hanoi probably feels the struggle has now entered a new stage, the fight/talk phase, which can be expected to culminate in a successful conclusion within the next two years. Hanoi probably believes it has a good chance of achieving its maximum goals, and is determined to realize at least its minimum objectives, through a fight/talk strategy. Its maximum goals are probably complete withdrawal of US forces, a political settlement in the South which would permit a rapid Communist takeover followed by ~~rather rapid~~ ^{reunification} and recognized spheres of influence in Laos and Cambodia. Its minimum goals are probably removal of most US forces and a political settlement,

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including a coalition government in some form, which would assure a Communist takeover in the next few years. At present, Hanoi may be re-assessing the situation and crystallizing strategy while at the same time feeling out the US in this new situation.

While in a reasonably strong position, Hanoi has constraints and problems. It has no assurance the US will not chose to escalate beyond any extent in the past, a possibility which has grave implications. Heavily dependent at present on Soviet military aid, Hanoi may believe it can rely on such assistance only so long as its policies remain within certain limits, including below the level of a full-scale invasion of the South and directed toward a favorable negotiated settlement. Hanoi, moreover, is probably/conflicting pressures from the Chinese and Russians, the former urging a protracted conflict and the latter pressing for a negotiated settlement acceptable to Hanoi. While this situation ~~also~~ enables Hanoi to play one against the other thus retaining a reasonable degree of independence, it also means Hanoi is operating from a divided base of external support which is a ~~constant~~ ^{constraint}. Hanoi also must always keep in mind the danger of becoming overly dependent on the Chinese and this limits the extent to which it can risk a larger war. Further, a hard-core of Nationalist resistance, centered in urban areas, remains in the South which the Tet offensive did not succeed in shattering. And finally, there is always the danger of a fracturing of the Party apparatus. While tensions within the Party exist, there is no evidence available to us that this has reached a dangerous stage, or will do so in the near future. Yet this is always the most difficult development for external observers to discern and the Party apparatus, given the hardships of the long struggle and its increasing cost, may be under more strain than we realize.

One of the most important, and difficult to judge, facets of Hanoi's position is their perception of the US and Nationalist situations. With respect to the US, Hanoi may feel there is a good chance the US lacks the will to stay the course long enough to drive a hard bargain, and, further, that real bargaining at this point would be unwise since there is no assurance the next Administration would be bound by commitments made now. Hanoi may also believe that while the American people are increasingly opposed to US policy in Viet Nam, further hard blows in the South which demonstrate Communist power and "justness", are necessary before the US will be willing to cut its losses and withdraw.

With respect to the Nationalist situation, Hanoi may believe their will to continue, and cohesion, while greater than expected, in view of the Tet experience, is dependent on US will and cannot survive any serious weakening of the latter. Hanoi may also feel that turning the conflict toward a political settlement, or at least a discussion of the latter, would be sufficient to collapse Nationalist will and stability.

Hanoi probably views the Nationalist as seriously divided, ruled by a weak, corrupt government which has little popular support, and almost all of that in urban rather than rural areas, and a weak administrative and military apparatus. Yet Hanoi also knows that strong groups remain in the South, with genuine popular support, which strongly oppose a Communist takeover (Catholics, Hoa Hao, etc.). Hanoi may believe the most important remaining obstacle to a political takeover, is the RVNAF. If the latter began to fall apart the strongest cohesive political/administrative force would give way as well as the essential source of military staying power for those Nationalist groups which enjoy popular support. Thus, Hanoi may believe its principle Nationalist target, to be brought under

attack through both political and military means in the fight/talk phase, is the RVNAF.

Following is an evaluation of the way Hanoi may view its principle options and courses of action in the new fight/talk phase:

Talking:

Bombing: The only "deal" Hanoi would be willing to make in return for full cessation of the bombing would be an agreement to begin discussions of a political settlement in the South, including some form of increased recognition and status for the NLF, which would take part in the talks. Even though a limited mutual DMZ pull back would not "hurt" Hanoi too much, it would not agree to this unless we first stopped the bombing since this would set a precedent of moving toward de-escalation first and political discussions second, whereas they are seeking the reverse. If the US unilaterally stopped the bombing, Hanoi might be willing to trade off a limited DMZ pull back for opening of political talks in which the NLF would participate. If the present bombing pattern continues, Hanoi probably will continue to try to increase political and psychological pressure on the US to agree to a unilateral halt, and retain its present negotiation posture.

Troop Withdrawal: Hanoi will not agree to any substantive mutual troop withdrawal, even if the phasing were clearly in its favor, unless this follows a favorable political settlement. Troop withdrawal under any other conditions would be viewed by Hanoi as a political and psychological defeat (admitting not only an invasion but one which had failed), and would also weaken Communist capability in the South even if many NVA troops became VC. Even if Hanoi felt it could cheat successfully enough to retain its present military capabilities in the South while US forces began to withdraw,

it would not be willing to proceed in this direction unless at the same time political discussions were bearing fruit.

Cease-fire: As with mutual troop withdrawal, Hanoi would not agree to any cease-fire unless following a successful political settlement, and would take even a harder line on this than on troop withdrawal. Even though a cease-fire might shatter Nationalist will and cohesion, Hanoi would not be willing to take this risk since a cease-fire would also cause serious, esprit problems in the Communist camp, reduce their bargaining position by reducing their military pressure options and get the US off the hook in terms of internal American dissension. A cease-fire would almost inevitably turn the conflict primarily into a political one and Hanoi is not prepared to do this until a favorable settlement as the basis for such a contest exists.

Political Settlement: Hanoi's principal tactical objective in terms of negotiations is to have political settlement talks in progress while the fighting continues. Hanoi would view this as leading to erosion of US and Nationalist will and toward fragmentation of US/GVN unity of purpose. Hanoi might be willing to settle for a fuzzy status for the NLF in a four-party conference and might agree to a two-track negotiation situation so long as the Saigon/NLF talks took place in a formal setting. The important point would be to have the talks taking place, a situation which Hanoi would hope in itself would so weaken the Nationalist position as to permit a settlement on Hanoi's terms. Hanoi would initially demand a new government but, depending on the extent of Nationalist erosion, might be willing to settle for only one or two Cabinet posts in a coalition government as a palatable, face-saving "compromise" which would be ample. Hanoi, however, would insist on holding local power in all rural areas which the Communists now control (i.e., "Alliance village and district chiefs

and security officials.) Hanoi might agree to some form of elections to form a coalition government and to ratify its rural control but would probably greatly prefer an agreement on this without elections.

Fighting:

Concurrent with the above efforts in the negotiation arena, Hanoi's military efforts will probably be along the following lines:

Consolidation of existing rural control and preparations to transform its semi-covert control apparatus into an overt, "legal" one.

Seek to sustain a favorable balance of forces and to retain the initiative but not commit its forces to another Tet type effort unless it believed this would be the coup de grace.

Probe for vulnerable urban targets and hit these hard on a limited basis. Such attacks would probably be timed to achieve maximum benefit in the talks.

Continue efforts to paralyze and disrupt the Nationalist economy in urban areas.

Hit vulnerable RVNAF units as hard as possible, perhaps particularly RF and PF units.

Keep US forces dispersed and tied down.