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TS-185754

4 August 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist Reactions to Certain US Reprisals Against North Vietnam

1. The proposed US reprisals would evoke sharp DRV military reactions, as we estimate below, but we do not consider that such enemy reactions would represent a deliberate decision to provoke or accept a major escalation of the Vietnam war. We do not believe that Hanoi or Peiping feel themselves under any pressure markedly to change the nature of the war; indeed, they almost certainly estimate that the war is going well for them in present circumstances, and that South Vietnamese will to resist the Viet Cong's attrition may give way before too long. The 31 July attack on the U.S.S. Maddox was almost certainly prompted primarily by considerations of defense and honor, growing out of what DRV authorities evidently believed was a US or US-sponsored attack against North Vietnamese territory. These considerations probably apply as well to the case of the second attack, 4 August. Also present, however, are probably these motives: (a) to signal to the US that the DRV is prepared

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to match US determination and it not about to accede to earlier US entreaties to reduce the war effort against South Vietnam; and (b) to avoid major escalation of the war by trying to show the US that any raising of the ante on its side will involve the US in major hostilities in the area.

2. In our view, these basic enemy motives place a certain limit on the measures the DRV might take if suddenly hit with US reprisals. Hanoi's leaders are not damn fools and are not in a hurry to upset a thus-far profitable war effort equation. At the same time, they will not hesitate to use considerable force for essentially limited purposes. Furthermore, they will probably do so quickly, in response to US reprisals, since they have the capability and, apparently, considerable freedom of maneuver vis-a-vis Peiping.

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3. Enemy Reactions.

a. Military reactions. The Communists are likely to attempt a military response sufficiently strong to signal that such attacks on their territory and naval craft are dangerous but not so strong as to precipitate a sharp escalation of the Indochina war. We believe that probable reactions within this frame include:

1) Introduction of combat aircraft (MIG 17's and IL 28's) into North Vietnam, with Vietnamese pilots if they are sufficiently ready, otherwise with Chinese pilots "volunteers" or "sheepdipped" as Vietnamese. These fighters would probably engage with any GVN or US aircraft in DRV airspace, possibly including the Gulf of Tonkin. Over a longer period Peiping would also very likely introduce substantial amounts of additional AAA and radar gear.

2) Unconcealed (possibly announced) deployment and maneuvering of Chinese Communist ground and air forces in China's southern border regions.

3) A further step-up of VC action in South Vietnam accompanied by a terror campaign against American personnel.

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4) We believe the odds are better than even that Communist aircraft will attack the UD destroyers. It is possible that they will also bomb Saigon.

5) We believe it unlikely that the Communists would respond to either by marching the PAVN across the 17th parallel or by the introduction of major Chinese ground forces into Indochina. The Communists almost certainly estimate that an overt invasion across the DMZ would precipitate a major war with direct US participation.

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b. Political. The main thrust of the Communist response will probably be in the fields of propaganda, political action and diplomatic maneuvering. Hanoi, backed by Peiping -- and probably Moscow -- will adopt the role of outraged victim of US "aggression" and almost certainly demand an immediate international conference, without preconditions, to condemn the US and "neutralize" the Indochina situation before US bellicosity sparks a general war. Hanoi might also seek support for UN condemnation of the US. Such military responses as Hanoi initiates, either directly or through its clients and agents in South Vietnam and Laos, will probably be tailored to support this image and further this political objective. Hanoi will almost certainly feel compelled to undertake some retaliatory gestures for reasons of national pride; but we believe that, in the main, it will try to make its military ripostes appear "defensive," and will accordingly limit itself to direct counter-actions that can be portrayed in this light.

In terms of maneuvering (e.g. deployments) as opposed to actual actions (e.g., raids and attacks), Hanoi -- and Peiping-- will probably endeavor to be as menacing as possible and make it appear that the whole Indochina area is rapidly approaching the brink of all out war. The principal object of such maneuvering however, will probably be the political one of raising the international temperature and heightening world pressure for a conference.

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We still feel Hanoi does not want to change the general ground rules on the Indochina struggle or engage in direct conflict with the US. However, the risk of such a conflict would appreciably increase; for despite the real purpose of its bluster and military maneuvering, Hanoi would be reluctant to lose face by obviously backing down if its bluff were called.

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