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14 March 1969

**MEMORANDUM**

**SUBJECT: Chinese Communist and North Vietnamese Reactions  
to a Proposed US Course of Action**

**THE PROBLEM**

To estimate the reactions of Peking and Hanoi to overhead reconnaissance of large areas of South China by drone, U-2, or SR-71 aircraft. The aircraft would enter Chinese airspace from the direction of North Vietnam.

**DISCUSSION**

1. North Vietnam is being overflown regularly by SR-71 aircraft and, to a more limited extent, by U-2s and drones. It has been approximately a year, however, since the last reconnaissance overflights of Chinese territory. Hanoi, and more particularly Peking, would be concerned with the question of why the US was resuming such overflights at this time. Peking would probably view the action as indicating a somewhat more assertive posture by the new US administration toward China. The use

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of the SR-71 for the first time over China might intensify Chinese apprehensions, particularly because of the apparent US willingness to expose a highly sophisticated aircraft [redacted]

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2. If the overflights occurred in a period when the Communists thought they saw signs of a more aggressive US military posture in South Vietnam or a harder US negotiating line in Paris, both Peking and Hanoi might interpret the flight over China as a prelude to the resumption of US bombing in the Tonkin delta. In these circumstances, they might feel it prudent to take some defensive measures -- e.g., to beef up Chinese air defense capabilities north of their common border, or to return into North Vietnam the Chinese AAA units recently withdrawn from there.

3. Beyond this possible defensive action, the overflights would be highly unlikely to stimulate Peking or Hanoi to any important response. Both the North Vietnamese and Chinese would, of course, attempt to shoot down any intruder and, if successful, would propagandize widely, especially if the aircraft were manned. In view of the recent Sino-Soviet border clash and the clamorous propaganda battle which has ensued between the two, there would be

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some temptation for Peking to play up the US aerial intrusion as further evidence of US-Soviet "collusion." Hanoi's propaganda performance would be much more restrained.

4. Overflights of China, if taken in the context of proposed US military maneuvers in the Korean area and high tension on the Sino-Soviet border, might add something to Peking's belief that the US and USSR are collaborating to isolate and surround China. We cannot be sure how Peking's belief in such collaboration might affect Chinese thinking with respect to the Warsaw talks. Overflights, by themselves, might tend to discourage contacts with the US; fear of encirclement might, over the longer run, encourage such contacts. In any event, we doubt that the overflights as described would be of much importance in any Chinese decision with respect to contacts in Warsaw, or indeed in any other aspect of Chinese or North Vietnamese policy.

ABBOT SMITH  
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National Estimates

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