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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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DRAFT

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US COURSES OF ACTION

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the probable reaction of North Vietnam, China and the USSR to the following air campaigns against North Vietnam:

- I. A phased course of US actions consisting of:
 - A. airstrikes against 20 modern industrial targets in North Vietnam, followed by
 - B. mining of North Vietnamese harbors to prevent:
 - (1) use of deep-draft ocean-going ships only
 - (2) use of both deep-draft and shallow-draft shipsIn both cases, we assume intensive armed reconnaissance against LOCs and transport targets, followed by
 - C. airstrikes against the levees in the Red River Delta, followed by

GROUP I

Excluded from automatic
Downgrading and
Declassification

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D. intensive airstrikes against the transportation system, the airfields and certain minor military targets, and miscellaneous industrial and repair facilities.

II. A restriction of US bombing to the "logistic funnel," i.e., Route Packages 1 and 2 and Laos.

None of the above would call for the use of nuclear weapons or for air strikes any closer to the border of Communist China than at present.

DISCUSSION

I. GENERAL

1. There are a number of general considerations which would influence the immediate reactions of the Communist countries concerned and, more important, influence their judgement of US intentions. How the US explained its policy and intentions would be taken into account. In addition, ^{the} duration of the campaign, whether it was a rapid series of air strikes or a more gradual and prolonged campaign could be quite important in how the Communists would respond. Among the other significant factors

- 2 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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bearing on Communist reaction would be the general political situation at the time the proposed course of action was initiated, i.e., whether there seemed to be movement toward negotiations of some kind, ^{and} the general state of world opinion and international reaction to the US moves.

2. We think it also important to emphasize that in estimating the Communist reactions to an involved series of US moves, there are likely to be unexpected developments which would affect both the US and the Communist side. We have tried to point out certain possible developments such as the intervention of third parties at the UN. In addition, there is the great uncertainty over internal developments in China, and the state of Sino-Soviet relations. For such reasons, the estimated reactions of the Communists near the last stage of the assumed air campaign are highly tenuous. By that time a number of events could have occurred which might persuade the Communists to make some quite different responses than we foresee.

3. We have not tried to judge the affect on Hanoi's will to persist at ^{every} stage of this campaign, mainly because after the mining of the harbors, the effect on life in North Vietnam

- 3 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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would be a cumulative process. When and if the regime would judge that morale and the disruption of public order was a serious problem cannot be foreseen. Thus, it is not possible to say that at any given point in the campaign Vietnamese will to persist will crack. In general, however, we believe that if Hanoi does not change its policy after the full impact of the mining is apparent, then the subsequent US actions would probably not prove decisive.

II. COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO A PHASED STEP-UP IN US ACTIONS

A. Air strikes Against Selected Industrial Targets

4. General. All of the Communist powers would interpret the US action as an important change of US policy. They have apparently been unsure of which direction the US planned to move in the bombing campaign -- whether to escalate or to keep it limited. The airstrikes would convince them that the US had opted for escalation, though they would not be sure of how much or how soon. In any case, they would probably conclude that the US interest in a negotiated settlement was waning. As in the case of the previous strikes against the POL, there would be a barrage of propaganda denouncing the US move; the civilian nature of the targets and civilian casualties would be exploited as would the attacks in the areas of Hanoi and Haiphong.

- 4 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

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5. North Vietnam. North Vietnam has probably already discounted the effect of an attack on the country's industrial base. The North Vietnamese reaction would be attenuated by the fact that its industry is not essential for the country's survival because of the basically agrarian nature of its economy. Moreover, Hanoi would assume -- almost certainly correctly -- that much of the effect of the US action could be offset by increased imports from the USSR and Communist China, and that the supplies necessary to keep the economy going and to sustain the war effort could be obtained. At this stage of the war, we believe that North Vietnam would be willing to accept the destruction of its industrial facilities in order to continue the war and that the US action would not have any decisive effect on the North Vietnamese will to persist.

6. North Vietnam would probably use its (96 MIG-15s and 17s, and 18 MIG-21s) in attempting to defend its industrial plants, particularly those targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. This plus the use of already heavy SAM and AAA air defenses in the area could lead a substantial step up in the air war over North Vietnam. Thus, it is possible that the stepped up North Vietnamese air reaction would confront the US with the question of whether to destroy the airfields.

- 5 -

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T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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SENSITIVE

7. China. Despite the present turmoil in Communist China, we are reasonably confident that the US action would not trigger any significant change in Peking's position concerning the war in Vietnam. China would step up its economic aid to North Vietnam as well as providing additional air defense equipment. Peking would almost certainly be willing to increase the number of anti-aircraft and logistic troops it has in North Vietnam; currently estimated at 25,000 to 47,000 men.

8. The USSR. The Soviet Union would be somewhat concerned that the US action marked the beginning of a new and more dangerous phase of the war, which, as it unfolded, would confront the USSR with increasingly difficult problems and decisions. At this point, the Soviets would be mainly . . . l to meet whatever new requirement Hanoi levied for economic and military aid.

- 6 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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SENSITIVE

B. Mining of the Harbors

9. General. The Communist countries would consider the mining as a considerably more provocative and dangerous course of action, particularly if it followed soon after the airstrikes against industrial targets. They would see the US action as proof that the war was rapidly escalating, and they would probably assume that the US was no longer interested in a compromise and was intent on the war to a complete victory whether by negotiations or not. US protestations to the contrary would not be believed. In the hope of increasing world pressure on the US for a unilateral de-escalation of its activities in the war, Communist propaganda would stress the dangerous turn of events and the increased possibility of a confrontation between the major powers. At this stage the Vietnamese problem would probably be taken to the UN, either by neutrals or by the USSR and East Europeans.

10. North Vietnam. Hanoi has already begun to prepare its citizens for the possibility that its harbors will be mined. Nevertheless, the actual mining would be a jolt and would increase fears that the ultimate aim of the US was to destroy the North

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

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Vietnamese regime. There is little that Hanoi can do to prevent the mining: it has no capacity to deal with the mines themselves. It is likely, however, that North Vietnam would commit its aircraft against the US mining effort. But Hanoi's main concern would be to improvise alternative means by which to maintain the flow of supplies into the country.

11. The North Vietnamese leaders would probably estimate that they and their Communist allies could find ways to continue the flow of essential military and economic goods, although with far more difficulty and disruption. If the mining were effective against some or all shallow draft shipping, then the rail lines would have to operate at maximum capacities, and would thus be highly vulnerable to air strikes. Thus, the US action could considerably increase Hanoi's problems in prosecuting the war. In the near term, we do not believe Hanoi would be forced to abandon the war in South Vietnam.

12. It is possible that at this point, decide that it could not simply absorb the US moves without a major response. In these circumstances, North Vietnam might attempt

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

some highly demonstrative action of its own, e.g., attacking a US carrier or attempting an airstrike against South Vietnam. We believe that such actions are unlikely since Hanoi would probably calculate that they would only draw an even greater US reaction in response. , it is likely that the VC would try to make a sustained attempt to close the channel into Saigon.

13. China. We doubt that the mining would automatically produce any significant change in Chinese policy toward Vietnam. There would be a round of propaganda. At a minimum, China would attempt to increase substantially the amount of supplies sent to North Vietnam, although the flow of supplies over the rail lines out of China might be disrupted by the internal convulsions there. But the present upheaval in China makes it almost impossible to predict with confidence Peking's reaction to the mining. There would be some chance that China would react strongly, perhaps even going so far as to directly intervene in the air over Vietnam, though we consider this unlikely. If requested, Peking would augment its forces in North Vietnam.

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

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14. The USSR. The US action would confront the USSR with a more direct challenge, since the Soviets supply much of North Vietnam's economic requirement by sea (estimated at \$150 million last year). The Soviets would be embarrassed by their inability to prevent or counter the US move. Moreover, unless they were prepared to take new risks they would be immediately vulnerable to Chinese taunts. And, of course, the new situation would mean that almost all deliveries of supplies, military and civilian, would be at the sufferance of Peking (particularly, if the mining made it too dangerous to offload shipments onto small vessels). To cover this embarrassing situation, the Soviets would resort to a considerable verbal escalation hoping to force the US to retreat. And they would probably allow "volunteers" to go to North Vietnam if Hanoi asked for them.

15. But from a practical point of view the Soviets would have little choice but to accept the situation. We assume that the Soviet experts would conclude that the mines would be too difficult to sweep and, in any case, could be easily replaced. In such circumstances we believe the USSR would not be willing to take the risk of bringing down the ships and aircraft that would

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

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SENSITIVE

probably be necessary to keep the sea lanes open to North Vietnam. The Soviets could use the situation as an excuse to disengage from the Vietnam war by charging Chinese obstructionism and so forth. But the Soviets almost certainly consider the option politically infeasible. The net result, however, would be that as China's role in the delivery of essential supplies increased there would probably be a loss of Soviet influence in Hanoi, at least as long as Hanoi was determined to persist in the war.

16. The Soviets would be likely to strike back at the US in their bilateral relations. Any ongoing US efforts to begin a dialogue on East-West issues would be frozen. The Soviets would exploit the US action with the European states by charging that the US/^{was}no longer concerned with Europe and was irresponsible and aggressive in its world relations. For a number of reasons, including presenting themselves as a reasonable nation, the Soviets would be unlikely to increase pressures in Berlin. The USSR would probably move to have the UN condemn the US for the mining. In addition, they might recall the Soviet ambassador from Washington in a public display of anger. These possibilities would be greatly strengthened if the mining operations were carried out without warning or with some serious damage to Soviet ships. How long this freeze in US-Soviet relations would continue would depend on subsequent events.

- li -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

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17. The USSR and China. The US action could come at a time when Sino-Soviet relations are particularly tense. But to offset fully the closing of North Vietnam's ports, a much greater degree of Sino-Soviet cooperation would be required. If the shallow draft mining compelled the Soviets to find other routes, they would be forced to obtain Peking's approval for transshipment across China.* A Soviet airlift could be attempted, but the quantities of supplies that could be airlifted would be small unless staging rights could be acquired in China.

18. Though North Vietnam would insist on keeping supplies moving, the US action would probably not force any significant improvement in Sino-Soviet cooperation. China would argue that the Soviets should confront the US on the high seas, while the USSR would counter that Chinese/^{obstinacy} hindered joint efforts to support Hanoi. Thus, to some extent, politics would probably interfere with Communist efforts to offset the mining of the ports.

* During 1966, about 120 Soviet ships delivered about 530,000 tons of goods to North Vietnam. This was comprised of 99 dry-cargo vessels carrying 327,800 tons of supplies and 23 tankers which delivered 203,000 tons of POL.

- 12 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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C. Attacks on the Red River Delta Levees

19. General. Coming after the two actions discussed above, the bombing of the levees would be viewed by the Communists as proof that the US was engaged in a campaign to destroy North Vietnam in an attempt to end the war. The Communists would calculate -- almost certainly correctly -- that adverse reaction to the US move would be widespread and they would exploit such sentiment, emphasizing that the prime target was the civilian population of North Vietnam. However, the US willingness to accept expected criticism would probably be sobering for the Communists. It would tend to convince them that there was little, if anything, that the US might not eventually do or risk to impose its will in Vietnam, including the possibility of direct invasion of the North.

20. North Vietnam. We believe that Hanoi would feel compelled to respond vigorously to the attack on its dikes. If Hanoi had not already begun an intensive air war to protect the LOCs after the mining, at this point they almost certainly would. Thus, as already noted, the US might have to decide the question of bombing the air fields. Moreover, the odds would increase at

- 13 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

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This stage that Hanoi would attempt some major retaliation of its own against the US either in South Vietnam or in the Tonkin Gulf, They would probably calculate that the US was determined to widen its air attacks and that there was little to be gained by restricting / their response. It is also possible that the VC in South Vietnam would significantly step up their terroristic activities directed at US personnel in response to the bombing even though this might cause heavy losses and expenditure of their assets.

21. The bombing would force North Vietnam to increase substantially its food imports, especially if the dikes were hit during the high-water period from mid-July to mid-August when destruction of cropland would be the greatest. Coupled with the increased need for imports imposed by the US mining program, the food imports would tax the overland routes from China to North Vietnam to almost their full capacity. This would inevitably lead to delays, and given the current US bombing program against these routes, it is highly doubtful that the total amount of through traffic would fully meet the demands imposed by both the mining and the bombing. Thus Hanoi would probably

- 14 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

be forced to establish priorities between the military and economic goods that it receives from its Communist allies. Nevertheless, we believe that enough supplies would get through to keep North Vietnam going and to allow it to continue the war for some time to come.

22. At about this stage, however, we feel that the North Vietnamese would have to make some basic choices, either taking whatever steps seemed necessary to cause the US to stop the bombing, or accepting the possibility of more damage and persevering. They might also decide the time had come to reconsider whether they could continue the war without significant escalation of their own or had to widen it by calling in the Chinese and Soviets or by spreading it to Laos.

23. Which option the North Vietnamese might choose would depend on how they viewed several factors. Of first importance would be the general state of North Vietnam, and the regimes judgment as to whether it could maintain morale and discipline despite the US air attacks. Secondly, would be the advice and assistance they received from China and the USSR. They would certainly want to know how far these two countries would go if requested to intervene. Finally, the military and political situation in South Vietnam would be an important factor.

- 15 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

24. They might calculate these factors and conclude that their objectives in South Vietnam were more remote and that the damage to the North was becoming far too costly. They could reason that only minimal political concessions could cause the US to desist. And they might decide that the alternative of continuing the war would make Hanoi far too dependent on Chinese assistance and troops, thereby gradually losing control over the war.

25. On the other hand, they could conclude the opposite. They could decide that, barring ground invasion, the US had done its worst and that North Vietnam could sustain further damage without having to abandon the war. They might also conclude that the Communist side could escalate in such a way as to force the US eventually to retreat from the bombing.

26. We cannot be very confident which course the North Vietnamese would choose, and, of course, they might simply procrastinate. But we think that at this stage they would be unlikely to reverse their policies and seek a way out of the war. They would probably decide that they had already suffered

- 16 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

too great a loss and made too great a commitment to the war in the South to back off.

27. If we are correct and Hanoi decides to persist, then there are a number of steps which they would probably consider to put the US under political and military pressures, though still short of massive Chinese ground intervention. These steps would / be designed to heighten the impression of a confrontation between the US and the entire communist bloc.

28. Hanoi would request and be able to obtain additional air defense equipment, SAMs and AAA, from the USSR and China. Furthermore, Hanoi would probably ask for, and China would almost certainly send, additional logistic and anti-aircraft troops to augment the Chinese force already there. This action and the presence of the Chinese units already in North Vietnam could be publicly announced to heighten its effect. Some Chinese ground combat units might be introduced into North Vietnam. The Soviet Union, Cuba, North Korea and the Eastern European Communist states might be asked to send "volunteers" and contingents to aid in the defense of North Vietnam. If so, we believe they would comply with Hanoi's request.

- 17 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

~~T-O-P~~ ~~S-E-C-R-E-T~~
SENSITIVE

// 29. There are two other steps that North Vietnam might take at this time. First, they might decide that commitment of more North Vietnamese ground troop to Laos and a subsequent offensive there would put the US and Thailand under pressure. They might reason that it no longer mattered if the US responded by occupying southern Laos. We are inclined to believe they would hold off on this move, mainly because they would fear that the US would then invade North Vietnam. For the same reason we think that Hanoi would be reluctant to make a far greater commitment of regular troops to South Vietnam, that is by invading with several divisions across the DMZ. But there is a fairly good chance that they would put in some more troops, perhaps in an effort to score an important victory against a US concentration or to occupy Hue. In any case, at this stage of the war, the VC and NVA main force might launch a general offensive against the US.

30. China. Peking's reaction becomes very difficult to predict. If circumstances were normal in China when the assumed action occurred, we would estimate that China would probably not want to intervene with its fighters from Chinese bases. If

- 13 -

~~T-O-P~~ ~~S-E-C-R-E-T~~
SENSITIVE

~~T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T~~
SENSITIVE

the current chaos and confusion in the internal scene in China still prevailed, the Chinese leaders would be to hesitant to risk a showdown with the US. But we could not be very confident that they would calculate the situation in a careful, prudent, and rational manner. There is also the possibility that Peking would feel compelled to react strongly in order to bolster the North Vietnamese will to persist in the war.

31. A final possibility is that as the US actions continued, China would come to believe that the collapse of the regime in Hanoi seemed likely. We have previously estimated that this is one of the circumstances in which China would almost certainly intervene in North Vietnam.* If the situation were normal in China (and the US action might tend to aid bringing matters back to normal there), we would still make this estimate. But if China were still wracked by internal convulsions similar to those at present, we would be somewhat less confident of this judgment, though we think the odds still would be better than even.

* The others are US invasion of North Vietnam and the bombing of Chinese territory.

~~T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T~~
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SENSITIVE

32. The USSR. The Soviet Union would be greatly alarmed by the US bombing and would view it as an indication that the US was willing to go to almost any lengths to prevail in Vietnam. Soviet propaganda would bitterly assail the US and would be designed to support Free World pressures on the US to stop its bombing program. If they had not already done so, the Soviets might sponsor a move in the UN to condemn the bombing. They would expect considerable perhaps a majority, support for such a move. Finally, the freeze in US-Soviet relations would become even deeper.

- 20 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

33. The Soviets are already heavily committed to help defend North Vietnam against air attacks, and the US action would complicate their policy problems. They would realize their limited ability to protect North Vietnam from airstrikes. Nevertheless, they would have scant choice but to attempt to fulfill Vietnamese requests for food and for more air defense equipment. The alternative would be to abandon Hanoi to Chinese influence -- an alternative the Soviets have already paid a considerably price to avoid. The Soviets, however, would be unlikely to agree to any overt involvement, beyond allowing "volunteers" to go to North Vietnam.

D. Intensive Airstrikes Against the Transportation System, Airfields, and Certain Other Targets

34. General. Coming after the previous actions, this US move would initially be generally regarded as more of the same. Thus, the initial reactions of the Communist countries would also generally follow the same lines discussed above. There would be, however, certain specific contingencies that might arise from the action, and the more sustained nature of it might also lead eventually to a change in the Communist reactions.

- 21 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

35. North Vietnam. Assuming a reasonably successful program of mining the harbors and bombing the levees, the LOCs from China would be operating at full or almost full capacity. Even under the present levels of US bombing against those LOCs, Hanoi would almost certainly be unable to meet all of its import needs via these routes; under an intensive and sustained bombing program Hanoi could not meet such needs. Moreover, large numbers of laborers would have to be/^{diverted} from other tasks to keep the routes operating at even partial capacity. In attempting to keep these routes defended and open, Hanoi might ask for and receive even more Chinese logistics and AAA troops.

36. If it had any aircraft left, North Vietnam would use them in an attempt to defend its LOCs/^{and}airfields. The North Korean pilots now in North Vietnam would enter the combat, if they had not done so already, and perhaps Soviet and Chinese pilots as well. Nevertheless, even if a substantial part of North Vietnam's air force survived the initial strikes, it would have only a limited and short-lived capability to interfere with the US attacks. Faced with the destruction of its air facilities, in any case, Hanoi might attempt a spectacular, last gasp air attack

- 22 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T/
SENSITIVE

against a US base in South Vietnam or a US carrier in the Tonkin Gulf. Eventually, however, Hanoi would have no choice but to send its remaining aircraft and pilots to bases in South China or to have them rendered useless. We strongly believe it would opt for the former, but if the situation in China were highly uncertain, it might not seek refuge for the remnants of its air force.

37. China. Apart from providing sanctuary for North Vietnamese aircraft and supplies to Hanoi (both of which it is already doing), Communist China might be asked to allow North Vietnamese aircraft to operate from Chinese bases. We have previously estimated that China, recognizing the risks involved, would prohibit such action. If circumstances were normal in China when the assumed situation arose, we would still make such an estimate. But if Peking had to decide its reaction in the midst of chaos like that now occurring in China, we would be less certain how the Chinese leaders would evaluate the situation.

- 23 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

38. A compromise of sorts might be worked out to minimize the direct dangers to China. For example, fighter aircraft might return to North Vietnam if and when the airfields were repaired, and then begin some limited defensive operations. If once again forced to deploy to China, they might remain inactive for a time and return again. In this way the Communists would create a semi-sanctuary in China. The situation confronting the US would be highly ambiguous, especially if North Vietnamese pilots were interspersed with some North Koreans, Chinese, and Soviets. Though this situation is possible, we think it unlikely that the Chinese would want to slide into possible confrontation with the US in this manner.

39. The USSR. The Soviets would be faced with about the same problems as discussed above. They would attempt to fulfill Vietnamese requests for more air defense equipment and for more trucks and rolling stock, despite their probable doubts as to the ultimate usefulness of such materiel. Otherwise, the Soviets would probably be caught in the crunch of hoping to find some way to avoid the rapid US escalation of the war, but without losing Hanoi to the Chinese in the process. By this stage, the USSR

- 24 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

would probably have privately beseeched North Vietnam's leaders to do something to stop the US escalation, but if Hanoi persisted, we believe the Soviets would abide with the North Vietnamese decision.

E. The Cumulative Impact of the US Escalation

40. Over time, the cumulative impact, physical and psychological, of the US escalations would greatly complicate Hanoi's problems in North Vietnam and would probably have some deleterious effect on its ability to sustain the war in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, we believe that North Vietnam would still be able to carry on for some time both in the North and the South and that its will to persist would not necessarily be destroyed.

III. REACTIONS TO A RESTRICTION OF US BOMBING TO SOUTHERN NORTH VIETNAM AND LAOS

41. General. It might be some time before the Communist were convinced that the US had changed its bombing policy. Once it became clear that the US was restricting its air strikes, the Communists would probably attribute the shift to the pressures of international opinion and domestic criticism. In this respect they would be encouraged that their estimate that the US would

- 25 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

not persist in a long struggle was correct. Nevertheless, they would remain highly suspicious that the US would resume more extended attacks at some point.

42. Hanoi would probably not be greatly concerned over the effects of the new campaign. If the Communist force structure in South Vietnam is basically fleshed out and the emphasis has now shifted to guerrilla warfare, then the manpower and supply requirements for the Communists in the South that have to be infiltrated from North Vietnam are likely to drop. Thus the US might find that it was bombing more and more against less and less.

43. The timing of the US move could be important. Hanoi might interpret the move as an attempt to probe North Vietnam's willingness to negotiate, particularly if the move were announced at a time when Hanoi had hinted at a willingness to talk. North Vietnam, however, has pegged even the consideration of talks on a complete stopping of US bombing. We believe it would continue for some time to hold to this position. But if the US held firm on its bombing and the war in the south continued to go against the Communists the chances of some change in Hanoi's strategy would increase. They might believe this more restricted program of bombing could be terminated by the US without Hanoi having to make any substantial concessions.

- 26 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

44. China. Peking's reaction to a de-escalation of US bombing would tend to be ambivalent. China's leaders would be relieved that the pressure on North Vietnam had lessened; and they would ascribe this to their support of Hanoi. On the other hand, however, Peking would probably be somewhat concerned that the US move might lead Hanoi to make^a reciprocal response, perhaps at Soviet urging. To counter this possibility, Peking would stress to Hanoi that the US will was flagging and that final victory was inevitable as long as North Vietnam held firm in fighting the war. In addition, China would publicly and privately denounce negotiations as an "evil" plot sponsored by the USSR and US to frustrate the attainment of North Vietnam's objectives.

45. The USSR. The Soviets would be relieved that the US had reduced its pressure on North Vietnam. Nonetheless, the Soviet leaders would probably believe that the US move was mainly because of internal US political problems and pressure from Communist and Free World countries against the bombing program. However, the Soviets would also view the move as a step toward creating an atmosphere more conducive to negotiations. We doubt that Moscow would go to any significant lengths to try to persuade Hanoi to

- 27 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

negotiate in response to the US move -- unless Hanoi first indicated an interest in doing so. In this latter case, we feel that the Soviets would become more active in arranging for talks.

- 28 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

