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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

11 May 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Chinese Attitudes Toward the War in Vietnam\*

1. China has a substantial stake in the conduct and outcome of the war in South Vietnam, and a vital interest in the preservation of a friendly Communist regime in Hanoi. From the beginning of the Viet Cong insurgency, in the late 1950's, China has provided political support and encouragement to Hanoi, and in later stages direct military aid. Vietnam has been the testing ground for one of China's principal ideological theses: that in the present era wars of national liberation can be successfully and safely pursued not only in Southeast Asia but throughout the underdeveloped world. By late 1964 and early 1965, Communist successes promised early vindication of this thesis which Mao had made a major issue in the Sino-Soviet dispute and the Chinese were urging Hanoi to move on to the final stage of mobile warfare.

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GROUP 1

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S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

2. US intervention with ground forces thus threatened a major blow to Chinese aspirations in Asia and the Communist world. A second factor affecting Chinese attitudes was the USSR's direct reengagement in the situation in 1965. As a result of these two developments, the Chinese position has changed somewhat.

3. Since the US intervention and the bombing of North Vietnam, the Chinese have gradually begun to attribute a new strategic significance to the war. In the Chinese portrayal, US intervention was not only a desperate effort to retrieve a local defeat, but might also be a preliminary for an aggressive war against China. The Chinese were thus forced to give increasing attention to the chances that out of the Vietnam war would come an attack on China. Consequently, China's fairly clear and explicit expressions of military commitment to Hanoi became progressively qualified. References to Chinese volunteers and comparisons with the Korean War declined in 1966, and in the Chinese formulas both Hanoi and Peking would decide what Chinese actions were "deemed necessary." And at critical junctures, in late 1965 and mid-1966 (the bombing of Haiphong POL), the Chinese reminded Hanoi that a principal virtue of people's war was self-reliance. Only recently, Chou En-lai made a similar remark to an American journalist.

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

4. In such circumstances, it might have been prudent for China to advise Hanoi to seek a political solution before the US buildup could be accomplished. But, in fact, China's hostility to negotiations of any kind has become more and more rigid, even to the point that Peking has been openly at odds with Hanoi on the question of whether a cessation of the bombing could be followed by US-North Vietnamese talks.

5. China's intransigence reflects several factors. The Chinese leaders, particularly Mao, probably still have faith that even in the new military circumstances the US can be defeated provided that Hanoi pursues a strategy of protracted conflict relying on the proper guerrilla warfare tactics. But even if Peking recognizes the diminishing chances of success for Communist aims, there are other compelling political reasons for Chinese insistence that the war continue. Peking probably realizes that the USSR would play a large role in any political solution in Vietnam, and that in peaceful conditions the USSR's economic and military assistance to Hanoi would pose a major threat to Chinese influence there. In its efforts, to limit the influence of the USSR in Vietnam, China has already paid a high price in its relations with North Korea, the Japanese Communists and other

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

sympathizers. To yield at this point would, in the Chinese view, not only be a defeat for Peking's general line of revolutionary strategy, but would represent a major gain for the USSR.

6. We believe the Chinese are prepared to exert considerable pressure, to increase types of military and economic aid, and, if requested, to station combat troops in North Vietnam in order to sustain Hanoi's will and ability to prolong the war in the South. Even so we do not believe that Peking is fully committed to a Communist success in South Vietnam at any price. The Chinese have allowed themselves room in their public position, especially in recent months, to accept the failure of the military effort in the South. If faced with a situation where only their own intervention could save the situation in South Vietnam, we feel that their fear of a US attack on mainland China would be the commanding factor. Rather than accept this risk in these circumstances, we believe that Peking would be inclined to accept a termination of the fighting without negotiations, in hope that this might permit some level of resistance to continue. They would say that the setback was owing to deviations from Maoist doctrines and to Soviet perfidy.

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

7. Actions against North Vietnam, however, are an entirely different matter. We continue to estimate that Peking wishes to avoid a confrontation with the US, which could result in a nuclear attack. We are certain, however, that China would fight if the US launched a deliberate and sustained air attack on Chinese bases and supply lines in South China. There are two other situations which would probably bring some form of Chinese intervention: a major invasion of North Vietnam, and the disintegration of effective Communist authority in Hanoi.

8. If the US extended ground operations to North Vietnam, the Chinese reaction would not necessarily be precipitate. It would depend on Peking's view of the extent and nature of the military threat to the Hanoi regime. If Peking judged that the threat to Hanoi was not a critical one, e.g., if it involved a US landing just north of the DMZ to outflank the NVA troops there, the initial Chinese military reaction would probably be limited to a rapid and conspicuous buildup of combat forces in South China and perhaps in the northern parts of North Vietnam as well. This action would be accompanied by strong verbal warning. But when and if they thought it was necessary in order to preserve the Hanoi regime, the Chinese would be prepared to engage US forces in North Vietnam.

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

9. A more ambiguous situation would be a threatened collapse of the Hanoi regime. It would be extremely difficult for either the North Vietnamese leaders or the Chinese to decide at what point a large deployment of Chinese forces in North Vietnam was necessary to maintain internal security. And this might be a gradual process, wherein Chinese forces were gradually introduced to free North Vietnamese forces for combat or public security. Even so, once having secured North Vietnam against an internal breakdown it is unlikely that Chinese forces would then move into South Vietnam.

10. Any estimates concerning Chinese actions must be qualified because of the uncertain situation in Peking. We cannot be sure what the impact of the internal struggle has had or will have on Chinese policies. It is conceivable that under some circumstances a foreign war might appear to certain leaders or factions as a desperate way out of a political impasse. It seems more likely, however, that the Chinese leadership would seek to avoid a major external crisis so long as internal affairs remain in disarray.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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SHERMAN KENT  
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- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T