



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

1 July 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. John P. Walsh
Acting Executive Secretary
Department of State

SUBJECT : Executive Secretariat's Request for
Background Information

1. In compliance with your request for background information on the US negotiating position and Communist actions during the summer and fall of 1968, we have prepared the attached memorandum which attempts to answer the three specific questions you posed. The attached memorandum is accompanied by an annex which analyzes in greater detail the pullback of Communist forces that occurred during the fall of 1968.

2. The attached papers have been carefully prepared on the basis of all documents and information available to us. Our cable record does not show or reflect obvious lacunae, but there may well have been private exchanges by telephone or cable between President Johnson and Ambassador Harriman and/or Ambassador Vance of which we are unaware. In responding to requests of this nature, we are obviously limited to the facts and the record known or made available to us.

George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachments

[Redacted]

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DCI/SAVA
Distribution

Copy No. 1 - Mr. Walsh w/atts

Copy No. 2 - Paris Negotiations w/atts

Copy No. 3 - [Redacted] w/atts

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: US and Communist Policies Toward Military De-escalation

SUMMARY

This memorandum addresses three basic questions posed by the Executive Secretariat of the Department of State:

- 1) Was the 1968 US delegation in Paris (the Harriman-Vance team) officially apprised of the fact that the US intended to maintain maximum military pressure on the enemy in South Vietnam after the bombing halt, and did the delegation proceed in the talks with this in mind?
- 2) How did the CIA assess the pullback of Communist forces in South Vietnam last autumn, particularly the withdrawal of NVA units from South Vietnam's northern provinces?
- 3) How long were the Communists preparing for the 1969 post-Tet (22 February) offensive, and at what point did the enemy appear to be fully committed to carrying out these plans?

This memorandum provides the best answers we can give to these three questions on the basis of information available to this Agency. An annex provides a detailed examination of the late 1968 pullback of Communist forces and the preparation for the next offensive.

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I. The US Delegation in Paris and US Military Tactics

1. The record available to us indicates that Ambassadors Harriman and Vance were generally informed about US military policy in South Vietnam and were briefed regularly on US operations. We do not have all the pertinent messages, and we do not know if Ambassadors Harriman and Vance were fully apprised of the details of General Abrams' standing orders for a post-bombing period. Anyone working closely on the Vietnam problem, however,

was generally aware that the US intended to maintain maximum military pressure on enemy forces in South Vietnam after a bombing cessation. We cannot find any evidence that the Paris delegation was informed specifically of the decision to divert air and naval assets formerly used against North Vietnam to step up the war in Laos and South Vietnam. There is no evidence, for example, that the Paris delegation ever received President Johnson's 29 October letter to Thieu in which President Johnson assured Thieu: "I have told General Abrams, and I am sure you have instructed your forces, that we must maintain every bit of military pressure we can summon within South Vietnam and Laos. This is a time for more military pressure on the enemy, not less."

2. The record we have of negotiation developments during the fall of 1968 suggests that the US delegation in Paris clearly understood that allied military operations in the south were to continue at established levels after the bombing halt. Any one studying the cable traffic of this period could easily infer that Harriman and Vance might have had personal misgivings about this policy, but we have no traffic in which such misgivings were officially voiced to President Johnson or Secretary Rusk. In an October (1968) cable, however, the Paris delegation did object to making any public statements, following a bombing halt, that "our operations in South Vietnam will continue on the present basis" because this would "create confusion in the minds of the other side and appear to be a contradiction of our understanding on mutual military restraint in the DMZ area."

3. It is quite possible that Hanoi had concluded from the course of the talks during 1968 that the US was prepared to take further de-escalatory steps after a bombing halt if the Communists showed that they too were ready to go that route. Some US statements may have implied this, but a careful review of our records shows that US representatives said nothing specific to the North Vietnamese, either in public or in private, to indicate that we planned to scale down military operations in South Vietnam after a bombing halt, without further negotiations. In the main, US officials simply did not address this question in any detail.

4. When US officials expressed a hope for an early reduction in the level of violence, such a hope was usually couched as a bid for Hanoi to join us in de-escalating the war and moving toward a peaceful settlement. In almost every instance, however, it was fairly clear that we intended the bombing halt to be the first step in this direction and that what we were asking for was

reciprocal de-escalation by the Communists in response to our move. In private, Harriman and Vance consistently let the Communist delegates know that this meant they were to join us in restoring the status of the DMZ and to cease attacking the three major cities of Saigon, Hue, and Danang.

5. Nonetheless, the Communists may well have believed that the bombing halt would be followed by further de-escalatory moves by the US, especially since the level of Communist-initiated violence was indeed subsiding just as the talks were in their most critical period during late September and early October. This impression on the part of the Communists could have been reinforced at an important meeting on 21 October when Vance and Harriman told Xuan Thuy that we "may want to talk about de-escalating the fighting at an early time." Thuy agreed that we could bring this up whenever we wanted after the bombing stopped. In most instances when US officials indicated we wanted to talk about de-escalation following a bombing halt, however, it was made clear that we wanted first of all to get some firmer commitments regarding the understanding on the DMZ and the cities.

6. Thus, as far as we can determine, nothing said by US officials in Paris cut directly across the policy of maintaining military pressure on the enemy in South Vietnam. In December, however, Secretary Clifford elaborated a bit on the direction that he, if not the Administration, wanted matters to proceed next. On 10 December he said publicly that he would like first off to get some "definitive understandings" in Paris regarding the DMZ and the cities, and about reconnaissance over North Vietnam. He added that "I would hope then we would move on to lowering the level of combat." In another interview on 15 December, Clifford carried on this theme by saying that so far there were no agreements on further de-escalation and that "the instructions we have given to our general out there is that he shall maintain intensive pressure on the enemy." He also said that when we get down to substantive talks with the North Vietnamese, one of our first objectives should be to reduce the level of violence in South Vietnam. He noted Ambassador Harriman's influence on his own belief that Hanoi is ready to enter into military understandings which would result in the withdrawal of troops and a "very substantial diminution" in the fighting.

7. During the long delay in getting talks started after the bombing halt, the Communists increasingly focused their propaganda on alleged US "intensification" of the war. The French pushed this line on 14 November, for instance, when they told us that the Liberation Front representative in Hanoi had told the French delegate general there that if the US continued to increase bombings in South Vietnam the Front would be "forced" to launch a new offensive. The

Front official said that if the US wanted the Paris talks to succeed, it would have to de-escalate the fighting in South Vietnam. The same Front official took a different tack on 10 December when he was about to leave for the Paris talks. He told the French that the Front was not planning on any major military initiatives, but it would continue to maintain pressure and would "reply to any allied moves intensifying the conflict." He also said, however, that the Front was willing to discuss reciprocal de-escalation.

8. When the Communists finally launched their much heralded post-Tet offensive in late February, they alleged US intensification of the war justified their own military action. Soviet Ambassador Zorin told Ambassador Lodge on 26 February that the US could not deny that "for over three months" the Vietnamese Communists had "committed no serious military activity." Zorin also claimed that Harriman had said "on many occasions" to him (Zorin) and to the North Vietnamese that after the bombing halt the US had in mind a lessening or decrease of military activity on both sides.

II. The Communist Pullback of Forces in the Fall of 1968

9. Our basic judgment at the time of the pullback last autumn was that Communist forces were being withdrawn for reasons of military necessity to rest and refit prior to the next offensive period. Ample evidence was available to show that such a respite was needed. We also assumed throughout this period of military retrenchment on the part of the Communists that Hanoi might try to use the withdrawals and the reduction in the fighting to facilitate a bombing halt and to get us to move further down the road of de-escalation and toward a political settlement which met their demands.

10. In retrospect these judgments still seem basically correct. We now know that the Politburo made a whole series of crucial decisions during the summer of 1968 which led to major tactical changes in how the war was to be fought, and in the Communist approach to the negotiations. One decision was to abandon the kind of costly, all-out military tactics pursued during the Tet offensive and again in May 1968. Another was to accept the presence of GVN representatives at post-bombing talks in Paris. The main thrust of these decisions probably was to see what could be obtained through negotiations before resuming major combat operations.

11. Thus, the Communists probably hoped that the pullback of their forces which began in September 1968 could be used to serve political as well as military objectives. The Communists may have hoped that the pullback would encourage the US to stop the bombing and perhaps to move rapidly

toward a settlement favorable to them. Although the bombing was stopped, the talks bogged down and the Communists went ahead with the plans for further offensives which they had developed along with their negotiating strategy.

III. The Resumption of Communist Military Efforts

12. Although preparations for renewing major Communist offensive operations in South Vietnam obviously were in train throughout the autumn 1968 retrenchment, Communist forces during this period were usually inactive. Infiltration of additional North Vietnamese troops was cut back sharply in August, September, and October and was renewed on a major scale only at the end of November. It then surged to a record level in December.

13. Communist main force units which pulled out of the northern provinces stayed out until early 1969. Communist activity in the Demilitarized Zone was sharply curtailed and no major units crossed through the Zone again until mid-February 1969. Small bands of enemy troops were spotted in the DMZ throughout this period and occasional shellings were mounted from within the Zone, but the pattern of Communist activity in that area changed markedly after the bombing halt. Similarly, Saigon was shelled on the eve of the bombing halt, but not again until the post-Tet offensive was launched on 22 February. Hue was shelled lightly twice in early February, but otherwise the three major cities were not shelled between the bombing halt and the post-Tet offensive.

14. Communist military activity in the period September through November strongly suggested that Hanoi was waiting to find out what we would do before proceeding with its own military plans. When it became clear that we intended to keep up the pressure in the south, and when the talks were delayed for weeks, first by Saigon's refusal to attend and then by a series of procedural obstacles, the Communists almost certainly concluded that they should go ahead with these military plans because there was not going to be any early breakthrough in the talks.

15. Indications of Communist plans for a "winter-spring campaign" appeared in captured documents and agent reports throughout the autumn of 1968. Most of these suggested that the first phases of the campaign were scheduled to start in some areas as early as December 1968.

16. Communist forces in III Corps were the first enemy units to terminate their withdrawal phase and redeploy to active combat sectors. Beginning in late November, major combat elements in that sector began a slow but relatively steady movement from border sanctuaries toward staging areas enroute to Saigon. Allied spoiling operations and intensive B-52 strikes in most cases stalled the southerly movement of Communist troops and supplies in III Corps and caused considerable slippage in Communist plans for December attacks.

17. By that time, however it was quite clear from all intelligence reporting that the Communists were increasingly committed to another major offensive, and Communist forces were moving inexorably in that direction. When the Nixon Administration took office on 20 January, it was quite clear that the Communists were in the advanced stages of preparations for an offensive. North Vietnam appeared to be trying, through increased infiltration, new troop deployments, and stepped-up harassing attacks, to project an image of Communist strength and to convince the new American leadership that any delay in reaching a settlement would not result in a better bargain for the allied side.

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ANNEXThe Communist Military Pullback in Late 1968 and Preparations for the
Early 1969 OffensiveSUMMARY

A review of the enemy's large-scale withdrawal of main force units from active combat sectors of South Vietnam during the fall of 1968 suggests that it was a move dictated at least as much by tactical necessities as by diplomatic considerations. There is ample evidence in agent reports, prisoner-defector interrogations, and captured documents that enemy forces were sorely in need of a prolonged respite following the heavy losses of manpower and materiel sustained during their three major offensives earlier in 1968. There is also ample evidence that this respite was designed to be used to prepare for a "Fourth General Offensive" or "Winter-Spring Campaign" to be launched as early as December 1968. On the other hand, the timing, duration and scope of the pullback, particularly in the northern provinces, strongly suggested that Hanoi hoped these moves might be exploitable in a way that could facilitate the negotiations in Paris and lead to a curtailment of the allied military effort.

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The Pullback

1. Communist military activity during the fall and early winter months of 1968 was dominated by the tactical disengagement of a large number of enemy main force units from three of South Vietnam's four corps areas. (Communist units in the Mekong Delta were the only ones that did not make significant withdrawals.) This disengagement began in some sectors as early as mid-August. It continued through November when more than 50 percent of the enemy's main force regiments -- 30 out of 56 -- as well as important regional and "front" headquarters command elements were redeployed from high priority target objectives to remote in-country base areas, border sanctuaries, or out-of-country safe havens.

2. The major unit withdrawals were most pronounced in the northern I Corps provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien and in the area of the Demilitarized Zone. In Thua Thien Province, the senior Communist regional

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headquarters as well as its five subordinate North Vietnamese regiments (the 6th, 9th, 29th, 90th, and 803rd) redeployed from the Hue-A Shau Valley area westward deep into Laotian sanctuary. Components of this senior headquarters, along with the 29th, 90th, and 803rd regiments, subsequently deployed to southern North Vietnam where they were joined in December by the 812th Regiment from Quang Tri Province.

3. In the northern Quang Tri Province-DMZ area, tactical disengagements were highlighted by the September withdrawal of the North Vietnamese 320th Division as far north as the Vinh area of North Vietnam. Several additional North Vietnamese infantry and artillery regiments, as well as the B-5 Front -- the senior enemy command headquarters in the DMZ area -- pulled back to base areas in southern North Vietnam from previous operating positions within and south of the DMZ. Moreover, prior to the spate of redeployments from September to November, the North Vietnamese 304th and 308th divisions had withdrawn in early summer from the Khe Sanh area to garrison locations deep in North Vietnamese territory.

4. Thus, by November 1968, the North Vietnamese had withdrawn the bulk of their forces from the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, including the DMZ area, to safe havens in Laos and, in some cases, in North Vietnam. By these withdrawals, the Communists had significantly weakened their tactical posture against allied strong points between lateral Route 9 and the DMZ and along the populous coastal plain from Hue to Quang Tri City.

5. In central and southern I Corps, however, no significant main force troop withdrawals occurred during this period, as major elements of Front 4 and the North Vietnamese 2nd Division continued to threaten allied positions in Quang Nam Province and the North Vietnamese 3rd Division remained targeted against Quang Ngai Province.

6. Communist major unit withdrawals in the II and III Corps areas, while quantitatively impressive, were not nearly as significant in terms of distance as those undertaken in northern I Corps. In virtually every case, they involved relocations to well established base areas along the Cambodian border, positions from which the units could quickly redeploy for strikes against major objectives.

7. The repositioning of enemy forces in central Vietnam was highlighted by the shift of the North Vietnamese 1st Division and two independent Communist regiments from the western highlands of II Corps southward to III Corps. Meanwhile, those forces remaining in the highlands -- two

infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, and the senior Communist command authority for the area (B-3 Front Headquarters) -- retired to traditional Cambodian redoubts astride the Pleiku, Kontum, and Quang Duc Province borders. The withdrawal seriously weakened enemy strength in II Corps and left only two North Vietnamese main force regiments -- the 18th in Binh Dinh and the 95B in the Pleiku-Binh Dinh border area -- available for offensive operations.

8. In the aftermath of their costly offensive of May 1968, the Communists withdrew the bulk of their main force units (three divisions) then operative in III Corps to remote base areas along the Cambodian border for an extended period of refitting and reinforcement. The Viet Cong 9th Division retired to the western Tay Ninh Province border; the North Vietnamese 7th Division to the northern Binh Long Province border; and the Viet Cong 5th Division to redoubts along the Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Binh Duong Province borders. Except for a brief return by some regular units for a series of attacks in late August, most remained out of combat through November. It was during this term of regroupment that the North Vietnamese 1st Division was integrated into the enemy's burgeoning III Corps force structure, a process also undertaken in border sanctuaries.

9. In the IV Corps area, no major withdrawals to border sanctuaries or out-of-country safe havens were evidenced on the part of the 25 or so Viet Cong main and local force battalions then operative in the delta, although a number did retire at least temporarily to traditional in-country base areas distant from prime allied targets.

Reasons for the Pullback

10. Tactical military considerations provide ample reasons for the widespread repositioning of Communist forces in the I, II, and III Corps areas during the fall of 1968. In northern I Corps, for example, allied spoiling operations against forward and rear enemy base areas, coupled with the damaging effects of exceptionally severe monsoon weather, appear to have rendered the Communists' logistics situation untenable, thus forcing the enemy to at least temporarily abandon large-scale operations in the region. In the DMZ area, seasonal rotational factors may also have played a role. In previous years, for example, division-level Communist forces frequently suspended combat operations below the buffer zone during the months of October, November and December while retiring to base areas in the southern DRV for refurbishment prior to returning to the southern battlefield in January and February.

11. Communist withdrawals in the II and III Corps areas also appear to have been dictated largely by widespread allied spoiling operations -- including massive B-52 strikes -- as well as by the heavy expenditures of men and materiel during the three major offensives of 1968. Perhaps equally as important, the enemy's local infrastructure and logistics cache network -- so vital to staging major operations against the populated sectors of South Vietnam controlled by the allies -- had been badly disrupted and partially destroyed.

12. In addition to the tactical necessities outlined above, there is a convincing body of evidence -- agent reports, prisoner-defector statements, captured documents, intercepted messages -- which indicates that the Communists planned to use this fall 1968 period of combat standdown and troop regroupment to prepare for another major offensive -- the so-called "Winter-Spring Campaign" -- phases of which were scheduled for initiation in some areas as early as December 1968.

13. Finally, authoritative justification for the tactical pullback in South Vietnam was provided as early as mid-September by no less a figure than North Vietnamese Politburo member Truong Chinh. In a major position paper broadcast by Hanoi, Chinh, speaking on behalf of the Politburo, noted that "at times, under circumstances, we must shift to the defensive to gain time, dishearten the enemy and build up our forces." He went on, however, to state flatly that the purpose of such a shift is to "prepare for a new offensive."

14. From the standpoint of the Paris talks, Hanoi may have deemed it desirable to scale down the level of its military activity in the South in the hope that this would help bring about a bombing halt and enable the negotiators to explore the possibilities of moving toward a settlement which met minimum Communist objectives. The Communists may also have hoped their pullback might prompt or otherwise produce a curtailment of allied military efforts. These considerations may well have dictated the timing, scope, and duration of the pullback. The evidence here is inconclusive, however. The Communists seem to have done nothing to discourage press stories or speculation suggesting the Communist pullback was a "signal" or conciliatory gesture, but they never officially directed US attention to the pullback. Since they did officially, if somewhat obliquely, direct US attention to a much less widespread pullback in June 1968, it would appear that the lack of official Communist reference to the fall 1968 pullback was deliberate. In short, while Hanoi seemed willing to have others read the fall pullback as a "signal," Hanoi carefully avoided lending any official endorsement to this thesis. On balance,

it seemed to us at the time -- and still seems today -- that Communist military movements in the fall of 1968 were dictated at least as much by tactical military necessity as by political considerations.

The Aftermath

15. Communist forces in III Corps were the first enemy units to terminate their withdrawal phase and redeploy to active combat sectors. Commencing in late November-early December 1968, combat elements from the Communists' 1st, 5th, 7th, and 9th Divisions began a slow, deliberate, but relatively steady movement out of their border sanctuaries toward forward staging positions from which past offensives against the Saigon area had been launched. Paralleling these troop movements was a maximum logistics effort by the enemy to preposition battlefield hardware and other supplies in these staging areas and along well established infiltration corridors leading to Saigon.

16. In most cases, the southerly movement of Communist troops and supplies was frustrated or stalled by the strategic deployment of allied forces (including the shift of the US 1st Air Cavalry Division from I to III Corps), coupled with relentless spoiling operations and sharply expanded B-52 strikes against forward and rear enemy base areas and along known infiltration routes to the Saigon area. In addition to forcing a serious slippage in the Communists' well documented December timetable for attacks in the III Corps-Saigon area, these allied countermeasures resulted in the loss of extensive quantities of war materiel earmarked for use in the Communists' winter-spring campaign. Enemy units in the subregions surrounding Saigon were particularly hard-hit, suffering heavy losses of key cadre, munitions, and other supplies.

17. In spite of the difficulties and setbacks encountered by the Communists in this sector in their winter phase, they nonetheless continued to press forward with preparations for another offensive campaign -- an effort which culminated in the 22-23 February post-Tet 1969 attacks.

18. The next enemy units to return to action in South Vietnam were those in the western highlands of II Corps. Following a four-month period of refurbishment in Cambodian base areas, the North Vietnamese 24th and 66th Infantry Regiments and the 40th Artillery Regiment relocated to traditional operating areas in Kontum and Pleiku provinces where they remained relatively inactive until the post-Tet offensive.

19. North Vietnamese forces in the northern I Corps provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien and in the DMZ area were the last to make their reappearance in South Vietnam. To this day, however, only a few of those main force units withdrawn in the summer and fall of 1968 have resumed active combat operations in the South. As pointed out earlier, the North Vietnamese had withdrawn the bulk of their forces in this sector to sanctuary in North Vietnam and Laos by 1 November. Between 1 November and early February 1969, only very small groups of enemy military personnel were detected moving in and through the DMZ, apparently engaged in reconnaissance and logistics missions and possible limited infiltration efforts. Although the 90th Regiment is known to have moved from sanctuary north of the DMZ southward through Laos to Quang Nam Province during this period, there is no hard evidence of any attempt by the enemy to deploy significant numbers of troops southward through the zone.

20. By mid-February 1969, however, there was evidence that up to three North Vietnamese infantry regiments had once again become active within and south of the DMZ. Action picked up in the DMZ area on the night of 22-23 February, but at nowhere near the pace set by the post-Tet offensive in other sectors of the country.

21. In sum, the February 1969 attacks were clearly planned as early as November 1968 and there is some evidence that at least some of these attacks were originally scheduled for December 1968. There is no evidence whatsoever suggesting that the decision to launch the post-Tet attacks was made after 20 January 1969.

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